

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Congress recently passed a new federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), that changes requirements governing states' academic standards, student testing, school accountability, and teacher effectiveness. ESSA replaces the No Child Left Behind Act, which had been in effect since 2001.

The ESSA is a reauthorization of a federal law designed to serve educationally disadvantaged students

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 to improve the quality of elementary and secondary education. The ESEA required state and local education agencies and other entities receiving federal financial assistance through Title I and other programs to help schools better serve educationally disadvantaged students.

The ESSA has some of the same requirements as its predecessor, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), affecting student testing and reporting, among other things. The ESSA also has different requirements affecting state academic standards, state accountability measures, teacher effectiveness, school improvement, a well-rounded education, and federal education funding. State NCLB waivers expire on August 1, 2016, but states must continue to support low-performing "priority" schools and "focus" schools with large achievement gaps until state ESSA plans become effective in the 2017-2018 school year.

The ESSA aligns content standards, student achievement, and postsecondary requirements

The ESSA requires states to adopt challenging content standards in reading, math, and science, and three academic achievement levels aligned with state requirements for credit-bearing postsecondary courses and career and technical education. States may develop alternative academic achievement standards for 1 percent of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. States must align English language proficiency standards with state content standards so English learners can master academic coursework.

The ESSA requires annual student testing in specific subjects

Like NCLB, the ESSA requires states to administer reading and math tests annually in grades 3 through 8 and one time in high school. In addition, science tests are required in each of three grades spans (3-5, 6-9, and 10-12). The tests must be aligned with state academic standards. States must report student performance data at the school level and by separate student subgroups, including English proficiency, disability, race, and poverty.

The ESSA allows states some flexibility in testing. States can either administer a single cumulative test at the end of year or combine the results of multiple tests over the course of the year. In addition, the law requires at least 95 percent of students to take the tests required for accountability, but allows states to determine the consequences for opting out of the tests.

The ESSA requires states to develop an accountability system

The ESSA eliminates adequate yearly progress (AYP) and the requirement for 100 percent proficiency in reading and math under NCLB. The ESSA requires states to develop an accountability system that includes: reading and math proficiency for all public schools and students and each student subgroup; academic growth or another statewide indicator allowing for “meaningful differentiation” for all elementary and middle schools; high school graduation rates; and the progress of English learners in achieving English proficiency. States must include at least one indicator of school quality or student success and assign weight to each indicator, giving more weight to academic factors, in order to identify underperforming schools and students.

NCLB and the ESSA identify the same student subgroups for accountability and reporting purposes. However, the ESSA also requires reports on homeless students, students with military parents, and students in foster care and, for annual state and district report cards, it requires civil rights data, data on teacher qualifications and postsecondary enrollment rates, and other data.

The ESSA requires states to identify schools for support and improvement

The ESSA requires states to use accountability data to identify schools for “comprehensive support and improvement” once every three years. These schools must include at least the lowest-performing 5 percent of all Title I schools (high-poverty schools receiving federal Title I funds to help at-risk students), public high schools where less than two-thirds of students graduate, and schools where one or more student subgroups consistently underperform. Districts must collaboratively develop a plan to improve school outcomes and may offer intra-district transfers. Schools unable to meet state improvement criteria within four years receive additional targeted support and intervention.

The ESSA requires states to distribute effective teachers

The ESSA eliminates the definition of “highly qualified teacher” under NCLB, continues to require that teachers and paraprofessionals working in Title I-funded programs meet state certification and licensure criteria, and allows parents of students attending a Title I school to request information about their child’s educators. States and districts must ensure that poor and minority students enrolled in Title I schools are not served by ineffective teachers and must report the methods and criteria used to measure teacher and principal effectiveness.

The ESSA redefines professional development, expands educators’ access to it, and creates leadership academies and teacher residency programs. It does not require teacher evaluations premised on student outcomes, but instead provides competitive state and local grants for performance-based teacher and principal compensation systems in high-need schools that must improve student achievement.

The ESSA creates a new block grant program to improve student learning

The ESSA includes a new block grant to improve conditions for student learning and students’ use of technology. The program uses a formula to distribute state grants and requires states to allocate at least 95 percent of grants to districts. Other ESSA funding is available for early childhood education and after-school and other activities to support safe and healthy schools and a well-rounded education.

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