

The Every Student Succeeds Act: A New Form of Accountability



No Child Left Behind – the latest version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act – has been replaced by the **Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)**. With this new law comes many changes to our public education system. One of the biggest changes is the shift in decision-making authority from the federal level to states in deciding how to hold schools accountable for their performance. There are four main components that every state must include in their new accountability system plus several ways for parents to raise their voice and ensure that students are offered every opportunity for success.

1 Schools will continue to test students every year in reading and math.

States are still required to test students in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school. States must also report on how students perform on these tests by subgroup – race, income, ethnicity, disability, and whether students are English learners. However, states/ school districts are encouraged to examine their testing requirements and eliminate any unnecessary local tests.

In many ways, the new accountability system removes the “high-stakes” aspect of testing, but maintains a focus on the importance of high-quality information on student performance. Participating in these tests provides valuable information so schools can continue to improve.

2 States will set their own academic goals and measure progress toward it.

In the past, federal law set a goal that 100% of students would be proficient in reading and math by 2014. Schools were judged based on their progress toward this goal. Now, states can set their own goals for proficiency and measure schools’ progress each year.

THE PARENT ROLE: As states are setting yearly goals and choosing which factors will be used to judge schools, it is important for parents to participate in the process. With more decisions being made at a local level, the parent voice will matter a great deal.

3 States will design their own system to hold schools accountable and decide how much test scores and other factors will matter.

States can choose how they will evaluate schools, but they must use four specific indicators in this process: (1) student proficiency on annual tests; (2) student growth; (3) graduation rate; (4) English language acquisition. States can also use a fifth indicator of their choice relating to school quality or student success. The four required academic indicators must be weighted substantially more in the state’s system than the fifth state-chosen indicator.

THE PARENT ROLE: Parents and advocates have a new opportunity to advance collaborations that help identify schools and states where students are falling behind and help ensure that corrective action is taken.

4 States will decide what should happen when schools fail to meet goals.

In the past, when schools failed to meet goals, federal law required specific interventions. Now, states and districts will determine which schools are failing and then create a plan to improve them. Schools that must be identified include schools: (1) that are the lowest-performing 5% in the state; (2) where less than 2/3 of students graduate on time; or (3) where certain groups of students (like students with disabilities) are consistently underperforming. The state will decide how long students must fall behind before the school must make a change.