

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal, state, and local governments spent about \$640 billion in 2015 to educate nearly 50 million public school children in the United States. ESSA, enacted in December 2015, reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. To receive federal education funds for school districts with high concentrations of students from low-income families, ESSA requires states to have accountability systems that meet certain requirements, but gives states flexibility in how they design their systems.

GAO was asked to review states' early experiences with ESSA. This report examines (1) selected stakeholders' and states' views of ESSA's flexibilities as states redesign accountability systems, and (2) Education's next steps in implementing ESSA.

GAO interviewed representatives of nine prominent national education stakeholder groups, selected for their knowledge about state accountability systems; met with education officials in California and Ohio—states that were among those stakeholders cited as offering differing approaches to developing their systems; interviewed Department of Education officials; reviewed relevant federal laws and guidance; and reviewed accountability system guidance from California and Ohio and these states' draft state plans.

GAO is not making recommendations in this report. The Department of Education provided technical comments on a draft of this report, which we incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-17-660](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT

Early Observations on State Changes to Accountability Systems

What GAO Found

According to most of the nine education stakeholder groups GAO interviewed and officials in the two states GAO visited, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) strikes a good balance between flexibility to meet state needs and ESSA requirements. Accountability systems measure student and school performance to identify and assist low-performers. States are currently developing plans for accountability systems under ESSA. According to stakeholders, some states are using ESSA's flexibilities to significantly change their accountability systems while others are making more limited changes. Changes stakeholders discussed pertained mostly to four key components (see figure). GAO visited California and Ohio and these two states reported using ESSA's flexibilities to distinguish between levels of school performance, among other things. For example, Ohio plans to assign letter grades to schools on each of six performance indicators. Under Ohio's proposal, schools will also receive overall letter grades beginning in 2018. California plans to distinguish performance with grades for performance on each of six state indicators. Their proposed system will not provide overall scores for schools. California officials said reporting on individual indicators will allow them to show key distinctions in performance that an overall score could mask.

Four Key Components of Accountability Systems Under the Every Student Succeeds Act



Source: GAO analysis of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) accountability system requirements. | GAO-17-660

Note: This figure is intended to provide a high-level summary of selected components of state accountability systems as required by ESSA. For additional information on these components, see 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c) and (d). ESSA's provisions related to state accountability systems do not become effective until school year 2017-2018.

Education officials said next steps in implementing ESSA are the review and approval of ESSA-required state plans, and to continue to provide technical assistance to states. Officials also said that they are developing monitoring protocols for in-depth reviews of states' ESSA-related activities and will pilot them in early 2018. ESSA also includes certain reporting and review requirements, for example, (1) annual state reports to Education on student and school performance; (2) annual Education reports to Congress on state reported data; and (3) approval by the Secretary of Education of significant changes to state plans.