



July 2017

# EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT

## Early Observations on State Changes to Accountability Systems

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-660](#), a report to congressional requesters.

## 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](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov).

July 2017

## 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.

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## Abbreviations

ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act
Education	U.S. Department of Education
NCLBA	No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

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July 13, 2017

The Honorable Virginia Foxx  
Chairwoman  
Committee on Education and the Workforce  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Todd Rokita  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary  
Education  
Committee on Education and the Workforce  
House of Representatives

Federal, state, and local governments spent about \$640 billion in 2015 to educate nearly 50 million public school children in the United States. Ensuring that all students have access to a high quality education is a widely shared goal. Accountability systems help foster this goal by measuring student and school performance and providing information on that performance to key stakeholders—parents, teachers, government officials, and taxpayers. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires all states to have accountability systems that meet certain requirements, but gives states flexibility in how they design their systems.<sup>1</sup> In general, ESSA requires states to measure the performance of their schools and use those measures to identify underperforming schools and student subgroups for additional assistance.

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<sup>1</sup>ESSA, enacted on December 10, 2015, reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). Pub. L. No. 89-10, 79 Stat. 27 (1965), as amended by Pub. L. No. 114-95, 129 Stat. 1802 (2015). The previous reauthorization of ESEA was the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLBA). Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425 (2002). States are required to have accountability systems, in addition to complying with various other requirements, as a condition of receiving federal funds authorized under Title I, Part A of ESEA (Title I). Title I provides formula grants to states for their school districts to improve educational programs in schools with high concentrations of students from low-income families. See 20 U.S.C. § 6311 *et seq.* Accountability systems were also required under NCLBA. ESSA's provisions regarding accountability systems generally take effect beginning with school year 2017-2018. Pub. L. No. 114-95, § 5(e)(1)(B), 129 Stat. 1802, 1806-07. Under the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2016, the ESEA noncompetitive formula grant programs, including Title I, are to be administered in accordance with NCLBA for academic year 2016-2017. Pub. L. No. 114-113, § 312, 129 Stat. 2242, 2638 (2015).

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You asked us to report on states' early efforts implementing ESSA. This report focuses on (1) selected stakeholders' and states' views of ESSA's flexibilities as states redesign their accountability systems, and (2) U.S. Department of Education's (Education) next steps in implementing ESSA.

For this work, we interviewed representatives of nine prominent national education stakeholder groups knowledgeable about accountability systems, six of which worked directly with states as they revised their accountability systems in response to ESSA. We also visited state educational agencies, school districts, and a total of four state stakeholder groups in California and Ohio. (See appendix I for a list of the national and state stakeholder groups with whom we met.) We selected California and Ohio because they were among the states that national stakeholder groups cited as being illustrative of different state approaches to developing their proposed accountability systems. In each state, we visited three school districts that had schools in each grade span—elementary, middle, and high schools—and varied in size and geographic location. These states provide illustrative examples of how two states are revising their accountability systems in response to ESSA, and are not generalizable to the 50 states. We also interviewed Education officials, and reviewed relevant federal laws and Education guidance pertaining to ESSA accountability provisions. Lastly, we reviewed accountability system guidance from California and Ohio as well as relevant portions of their draft state plans which describe how they will comply with ESSA accountability requirements.<sup>2</sup>

In this report, we focused on four components of state accountability systems under ESSA that we identified during our early interviews with stakeholder groups as being key components of these systems, and as areas in which states are making changes to their systems.<sup>3</sup> We refer to these four components as: (1) determine long-term goals, (2) develop

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<sup>2</sup>For Ohio's draft state plan see <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Every-Student-Succeeds-Act-ESSA> and for California's see <http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/es/draftplankit.asp>.

<sup>3</sup>In addition, other provisions in ESSA related to state accountability systems include a requirement that states provide assurance that they have adopted challenging academic content and aligned achievement standards in at minimum, mathematics, reading or language arts, and science; and a requirement that states implement a set of high-quality student academic assessments in these subjects, which are to be administered in each of grades 3 through 8 and at least once in grades 9 through 12 for math and reading or language arts, and at least once in grades 3 through 5, once in grades 6 through 9, and once in grades 10 through 12 for science. See 20 U.S.C. § 6311(b).

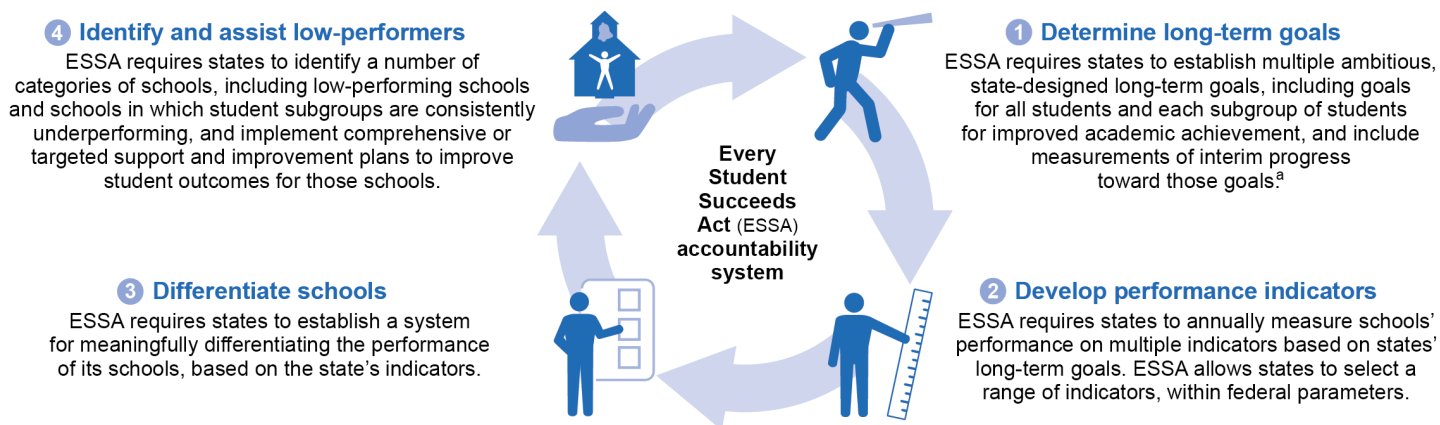
performance indicators, (3) differentiate schools (referred to in this report as distinguishing between levels of school performance), and (4) identify and assist low-performers.<sup>4</sup>

We conducted this performance audit from December 2016 to July 2017 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

## Background

State accountability systems under ESSA include four key components: 1) determine long-term goals, 2) develop performance indicators, 3) differentiate schools, and 4) identify and assist low-performers (see fig. 1).

**Figure 1: Four Key Components of Accountability Systems Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)**



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.

<sup>a</sup>Student subgroups include economically disadvantaged students, students from major racial ethnic groups, children with disabilities, and English learners.

<sup>4</sup>For the specific ESSA requirements related to these components, see 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c) and (d).

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ESSA requires states to submit state plans to the Secretary of Education to receive Title I funds. These funds support schools and districts with high concentrations of students from low-income families. ESSA requires that states develop these plans with “timely and meaningful consultation” with a variety of stakeholders, and also coordinate the plans with certain other federal programs.<sup>5</sup> Education has developed a state plan template that states can use when formulating their consolidated state plans and procedures for submitting these plans.<sup>6</sup> ESSA requires that state plans be peer reviewed and that the Secretary of Education approve them if they meet the requirements in the law.<sup>7</sup>

As of May 2017, 16 states and the District of Columbia had submitted their plans to Education for review; the remaining plans are due by

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<sup>5</sup>20 U.S.C. § 6311(a)(1). Specifically, ESSA requires the state educational agency responsible for developing the state plan to consult with “the Governor, members of the State legislature and State board of education (if the State has a State board of education), local educational agencies (including those located in rural areas), representatives of Indian tribes located in the State, teachers, principals, other school leaders, charter school leaders (if the State has charter schools), specialized instructional support personnel, paraprofessionals, administrators, other staff, and parents.” ESSA also requires that state plans be coordinated with other programs under ESSA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Head Start Act, and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, among others. Each state is also required to make the state plan publicly available for public comment for a period of not less than 30 days, prior to submission to the Secretary of Education for approval. 20 U.S.C. § 6311(a)(8).

<sup>6</sup>States may submit consolidated plans that address multiple ESSA programs in addition to Title I. ESSA requires the Secretary of Education to establish procedures and criteria for submitting consolidated state plans and establish the information, assurances, and other material required to be included in them. In establishing these criteria, procedures, and other requirements, Education “shall collaborate with State educational agencies and, as appropriate, with other State agencies, local educational agencies, public and private agencies, organizations, and institutions, private schools, and representatives of parents, students, and teachers” and require only descriptions, information, assurances, and other materials “that are absolutely necessary for the consideration of” the consolidated state plan. 20 U.S.C. § 7842.

<sup>7</sup>20 U.S.C. § 6311(a)(4). Only those portions of a state’s consolidated state plan that relate to ESSA Title I, Part A, ESSA Title III, Part A, and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Title VII, Subpart B are required to be peer reviewed.



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September 18, 2017, according to Education’s guidance.<sup>8</sup> Both states we visited as part of our review intend to submit their plans by the September deadline.

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## Stakeholders and Selected States View ESSA’s Accountability Provisions as Flexible

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### Stakeholders See ESSA as Flexible and Said Some States Are Making More Changes to Their Accountability Systems Than Others

Representatives of all nine national stakeholder groups we spoke with saw ESSA’s accountability provisions as somewhat flexible, with most indicating that ESSA strikes a good balance between flexibility and requirements.<sup>9</sup> One stakeholder said, for example, that ESSA “threads the needle very well” between giving states flexibility in designing their accountability systems and placing requirements on states to help ensure that all children have an opportunity to get a good education. Most stakeholders also mentioned ESSA provisions related to developing performance indicators as an example of flexibility. One stakeholder, for example, saw these provisions as flexible because they allow states to define the exact indicators they will use, including indicators that measure student growth in addition to student proficiency when assessing academic performance.

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<sup>8</sup>In November 2016, Education issued a final rule implementing the accountability and state plan portions of ESSA, among other things. Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as Amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act—Accountability and State Plans, 81 Fed. Reg. 86,076 (Nov. 29, 2016). At the same time, Education also issued guidance for states, including a consolidated state plan template. In accordance with a January 20, 2017 memorandum from the Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff, titled “Regulatory Freeze Pending Review,” published in the *Federal Register* on January 24, 2017, Education delayed the effective date of the final rule until March 21, 2017. 82 Fed. Reg. 8669 (Jan. 30, 2017). On March 9, 2017, Congress passed a joint resolution of disapproval with respect to the final rule, pursuant to procedures set forth in the Congressional Review Act. Education released a revised template for consolidated state plans on March 13, 2017. On March 27, 2017, the President signed the joint resolution of disapproval, invalidating the final rule. Pub. L. No. 115-13, 131 Stat. 77 (2017).

<sup>9</sup>Throughout this report, we use “most national stakeholder groups” to describe comments made by representatives of 5 to 8 of the 9 stakeholder groups with whom we spoke.

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Representatives of four national stakeholder groups that have worked directly with states to help them develop and revise their accountability systems told us that the extent to which states are revising their accountability systems varies because some states are satisfied with their current systems and others are using the flexibilities in the law to make significant overhauls. According to representatives of one stakeholder group, for example, many states already began revising their accountability systems as a result of waivers Education granted under the previous reauthorization, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLBA).<sup>10</sup> They further said that ESSA is generally flexible enough for states to continue down the path they started in implementing their NCLBA waivers. In addition, representatives of several stakeholder groups mentioned that for states that see their current accountability systems as lacking in some way, or because consultation with state stakeholders has pointed to the need for significant change, ESSA provides room for them to consider innovative revisions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>In September 2011, in response to states' requests for relief from certain provisions contained in the NCLBA, Education invited states to request waivers that would grant them flexibility in meeting certain requirements in the law in effect at that time. As part of this "ESEA flexibility" initiative, states agreed to address certain principles identified by Education, including, among other things, district and school recognition, accountability, and support systems. In response, almost every state applied for ESEA flexibility and Education ultimately approved waivers for 43 states, including Ohio, and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Under ESSA, all waivers granted through the ESEA flexibility initiative terminated on August 1, 2016. Pub. L. No. 114-95, § 4(c), 129 Stat. 1802, 1806. For the purposes of this report, we refer to these waivers as "NCLBA waivers." For more information on these waivers, see *K-12 Education: Education's Experiences with Flexibility Waivers Could Inform Efforts to Assist States with New Requirements*, [GAO-16-650](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 7, 2016).

<sup>11</sup>By several, we mean representatives of 3 or 4 of the 9 national stakeholder groups with whom we spoke.

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## Ohio's and California's Approaches to Incorporating ESSA Provisions into Their Accountability Systems

Ohio and California, the two states we visited, illustrate how different states are using the flexibilities in ESSA to develop accountability systems that are tailored to meet state needs as well as ESSA requirements for each of the four key components of state accountability systems: determine long-term goals, develop performance indicators, differentiate schools, and identify and assist low performers.<sup>12</sup> (See sidebars for summaries of ESSA requirements for these components.)

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<sup>12</sup>In this report we describe proposals for state plans as described to us by officials or in the draft plans themselves. GAO does not have a role in determining whether state plans meet the requirements under ESSA.

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## Determine Long-Term Goals

### Highlights of Selected ESSA Requirements: Long-Term Goals

ESSA requires states to design and establish ambitious long-term goals, including measurements of interim progress toward meeting them. For example, states are to set goals for all students, and separately for each subgroup of students, for improved academic achievement and high school graduation rates, among other things.

Student subgroups include economically disadvantaged students, students from major racial and ethnic groups, children with disabilities, and English learners.

Source: See 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(A).

Ohio officials told us that they chose a 10-year timeline for meeting their long-term goals to help address stakeholder concerns about providing schools and districts sufficient time to meet the new goals. For example, one of Ohio's proposed goals is that at least 80 percent of students score proficient or higher on Ohio's statewide assessments in English Language Arts and math within 10 years. Meeting this goal may be easier for some schools and groups of students than others, as some are further away from the goal than others. To close this "achievement gap," the state plans to set its proficiency goals for each student subgroup such that those groups furthest behind will be expected to make greater annual gains in an effort to catch up over the 10-year period.<sup>13</sup> Further, in an effort to make the 10-year long-term goals achievable for lower-performing groups, the state's draft plan proposes to set the 10-year proficiency goals for them lower than the 10-year goals for higher-performing subgroups. Ohio state officials and stakeholders told us that some stakeholders were concerned about having different goals for different subgroups: Some find the annual or long-term goals for low performing subgroups too ambitious and others find it problematic that certain students would be held to different standards than others. State officials said to meet the ESSA requirement of having ambitious long-term goals, they designed their approach to significantly close the achievement gap over 10 years. At the time of our work, Ohio was still working on its final approach to address this issue.

According to California's draft plan, California plans to achieve its goals within 5 to 7 years—a timeframe that coincides with regularly scheduled reviews of the performance indicators used in its accountability system. Unlike Ohio, California is proposing that schools and districts propose their own interim goals to close achievement gaps and that the same timeline for long-term goals (5 to 7 years) apply to all student subgroups. State officials mentioned that district interim goals must take into account the current performance of student subgroups and how far this performance is from the state's long-term goals.

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<sup>13</sup>Achievement gaps occur when one group of students consistently performs better academically than another group. Achievement gaps can exist, for example, between white students and other racial minority groups or between students from higher-income and lower-income households.

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## Develop Performance Indicators

### Highlights of Selected ESSA Requirements: Indicators

States are required to annually measure, for all students and for student subgroups, four “academic” indicators. These indicators include academic achievement for all public schools, as measured by proficiency on the annual state assessments, and the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate for public high schools, among other things.

In addition, states are also required to have, for all public schools, at least one statewide indicator of school quality or student success that meets certain criteria. This indicator may include measures of student and educator engagement, student access to and completion of advanced coursework, postsecondary readiness, school climate and safety, or any other indicator the state chooses that meets the requirements in the law.

Source: See 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(B).

Ohio officials told us that they plan to use their current indicators as the foundation for meeting ESSA’s requirements for academic indicators, and make some revisions or refinements as needed. With regard to ESSA’s required indicator of school quality or student success, state officials said they plan to include chronic absenteeism because studies show that school attendance is strongly correlated with successful student performance. Because the state already collects attendance data, the indicator also reduces the need for additional data collection. Ohio officials and stakeholders said that ESSA has prompted many substantive conversations about what to use for the school quality or student success indicator. For example, Ohio stakeholders and a school district official told us that they have concerns about using chronic absenteeism as a measure because schools and districts cannot control whether students come to school and that other indicators might be beneficial measures. State officials mentioned that in response to these concerns, Ohio’s draft plan now includes a commitment to pilot a school climate survey for potential inclusion as an indicator of school quality or student success in future years.

Although California’s draft plan proposes using its existing indicators to meet ESSA’s requirements for academic indicators, the state also plans to develop some new ones. For example, as an additional academic indicator, the state proposes to use chronic absenteeism. According to its draft plan, there is a strong correlation between strong academic performance and school attendance. For the school quality or student success indicator, California chose suspensions, with high rates indicating poor quality and failure, and low rates indicating success. State officials said that ESSA flexibilities allowed them to differentiate what was considered high and low rates of suspension by grade level (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school). They explained that this is important because it allows them to tailor the indicator for each level.

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*Differentiate Schools (distinguishing between levels of performance)*

**Highlights of Selected ESSA Requirements: Annual Meaningful Differentiation:**

ESSA requires each state to establish a system of meaningfully differentiating all its public schools, on an annual basis. This system must, among other things:

- be based on all indicators in the state's accountability system, including the four academic indicators, for all students and for each subgroup of students; and
- include differentiation of any school in which any subgroup of students is determined by the state to be consistently under-performing.

Source: See 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(C).

Ohio officials told us that they propose to continue to use the state's current system of six indicators, with modifications, to assess school and student performance. Under the proposal, schools would receive a letter grade on each indicator. Some of the indicators, such as academic achievement, would measure current performance while other indicators, such as academic progress, would measure growth. Ohio state officials told us that they also intend to roll up indicator scores into an overall letter grade for schools in 2018. They said that reporting a letter grade on each indicator provides detailed information, while an overall letter grade provides an easily understandable overview of performance. Ohio stakeholders and school district officials expressed concerns about both the use of letter grades and rolling up grades on each indicator into an overall score. They explained that words, such as meets or exceeds expectations, could more accurately communicate performance than letter grades.

California officials said they plan to distinguish performance of schools and student subgroups by using a dashboard in which school and student subgroup performance would be color-coded based on each of six state indicators. These officials said that each indicator measures current student performance as well as changes in performance over time. Unlike Ohio, California does not plan to aggregate the indicators into overall scores for schools and student subgroups. California officials told us that they chose their approach for two reasons. First, aggregating scores on indicators into an overall score can mask individual areas where a school may be struggling. In contrast, reporting individual indicators allows key distinctions to be maintained in performance across a variety of factors. Second, officials said that measuring performance in both the current year and over time on each indicator provides a more complete picture of performance.

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## Identify and Assist Low Performers

### Highlights of Selected ESSA Requirements: School Identification for Comprehensive or Targeted Support and Improvement:

- **Comprehensive support and improvement:** Based on the system of meaningful differentiation, each state is to establish a methodology to periodically identify a statewide category of schools for comprehensive support and improvement. This category must include schools that meet certain criteria, such as the lowest-performing 5 percent of all schools in the state receiving Title I funding.
- **Targeted support and improvement:** In addition, states are to notify each school district about schools in which any subgroup of students is consistently underperforming, and ensure the district provides notification to these schools.

For each school identified, the school or district is to develop and implement, in partnership with stakeholders, either a comprehensive support and improvement plan or a targeted support and improvement plan, as applicable, to improve student outcomes. These plans must be informed by all state indicators and include evidence-based interventions.

States are to, among other things, establish statewide exit criteria for schools identified for comprehensive support and improvement and additional targeted support.

Source: See 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(D), (d).

Ohio state officials told us that their processes for identifying low performing schools (known in Ohio as priority schools) and schools with underperforming subgroups (known in Ohio as focus schools) will be similar to the process they used under their NCLBA waiver and will include new indicators, such as chronic absenteeism as one indicator of school quality or student success.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Ohio officials in one district discussed a requirement in ESSA that they believe will improve Ohio's system of intervening in low-performing schools and subgroups—that states establish criteria for how schools can exit certain ESSA improvement categories. As part of meeting this requirement, these officials said that Ohio is developing benchmarks for graduation rates and student growth indicators, which they said should make it clear to districts when they can release schools from improvement categories.

California's draft state plan proposes to identify low-performing schools and student subgroups based on where they fall on its dashboard of color-coded performance indicators, and lists three options for how the state may do this. Regarding assisting low-performing schools and student subgroups, California state officials said they plan to give districts the authority to develop interventions. California officials in one district said that ESSA provides flexibility to reconsider how they provide school interventions. They said, for example, that they can now provide an intervention such as tutoring when they feel it will be most effective—before, during, or after the school day—and that this was partly because of ESSA.

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<sup>14</sup>Ohio's NCLBA waiver made changes to the state's accountability system in part by introducing new goals (1) to reduce achievement gaps, and (2) increase the number of high school students who graduate and are college and career ready.

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## Developing and Implementing State Monitoring Plans Is a Key Next Step for Education in ESSA Implementation

Given current timelines, Education officials said that the department is currently focused on the review and approval process for state plans and providing assistance to states in developing their plans. Under ESSA, the Secretary of Education is responsible for establishing a peer-review process to assist in the review of state plans, and for approving state plans that meet the requirements of ESSA.<sup>15</sup> Education officials told us that the peer reviewers will consider the technical, educational, and overall quality of specific portions of state plans when making their recommendations to the Secretary. According to guidance Education provided to peer reviewers, another goal is for reviewers to provide states with objective feedback on the technical, educational, and overall quality of their plans.

Education officials told us that they are developing monitoring protocols that they will pilot with eight or nine states in early 2018. These protocols are intended to guide in-depth reviews of state activities related to ESSA implementation. The officials noted that they are piloting the protocols to ensure that they have an appropriate monitoring tool to obtain information on how states are implementing ESSA requirements. Officials told us that Education used similar in-depth state reviews when developing past monitoring protocols, reviewing a select number of states each year with the goal of reviewing all states within a 3- to 4-year cycle. Given that some states have submitted their state plans earlier than others for approval, officials also noted that they will pilot the monitoring protocol in states that progressed enough to warrant monitoring. To complement the in-depth monitoring, Education officials said they also plan to continue their past practice of maintaining regular contact with all states.

Education officials also told us they are determining whether there is a need for additional guidance to states on aspects of ESSA implementation. Education has provided assistance to states in a number of ways. For example, the department hosted webinars on the state plan template that states may choose to use, and on the peer review process. Education has also implemented a technical assistance initiative called the State Support Network to support state and district school

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<sup>15</sup>20 U.S.C. § 6311(a)(4). Education is required to establish multi-disciplinary peer review teams that include, among other members, representatives of educators and researchers. Only those portions of a state's consolidated state plan that relate to ESSA Title I, Part A, ESSA Title III, Part A, and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Title VII, Subpart B are required to be peer reviewed.



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improvement efforts under ESSA. This network aims to connect states and districts with technical assistance providers and subject matter experts to develop strategies for supporting schools. According to the network's website, it aims to help states and districts learn from prior school improvement efforts, assess needs and assets to inform strategies, and build sustainable systems to support continuous improvement.<sup>16</sup> During our review, representatives of most national stakeholder groups with whom we spoke told us that states could use guidance on a number of issues. One example of guidance that they told us states might consider useful is identification of appropriate evidence-based interventions.<sup>17</sup> As part of its ongoing assistance to states, Education has addressed this topic in a number of ways, including non-regulatory guidance, resources via the State Support Network, and case studies.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>See <https://statesupportnetwork.ed.gov>.

<sup>17</sup>GAO has reported that using data—such as information collected by performance measures and findings from program evaluations and research studies—to drive decision making can help improve program implementation, identify and correct problems, and make other management decisions. See [http://www.gao.gov/key\\_issues/data-driven\\_decision\\_making/issue\\_summary#t=0](http://www.gao.gov/key_issues/data-driven_decision_making/issue_summary#t=0).

<sup>18</sup>See U.S. Department of Education, *Non-regulatory Guidance: Using Evidence to Strengthen Education Investments*, accessed June 26, 2017, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/guidanceeuseseseinvestment.pdf>), State Support Network resources at <https://statesupportnetwork.ed.gov/resources>, and case studies and other materials related to evidence-based interventions at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/oss/technicalassistance/index.html>.

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### Summary of Selected ESSA Reporting and Reviewing Requirements

- Annual state reports: ESSA requires states to submit annual reports to the Secretary of Education. These annual reports must include information on student achievement based on the annual state assessments, including disaggregated results for student subgroups. The reports must also include certain information on English learners, schools identified for support and improvement, and teacher qualifications, among other things.
- Annual report to Congress: ESSA also requires the Secretary of Education to submit an annual report to specified congressional committees that provides both national and state-level data on the information collected from the states' reports.
- Changes to state plans: ESSA provides that once a state plan is approved it remains in effect for the duration of the state's participation in Title I, though it also directs states to periodically review and revise plans as necessary to reflect any changes in state strategies or programs. If a state makes any significant changes to its state plan, such as adopting new academic assessments, the state must submit a revised plan or amendment to Education for review.

Source: See 20 U.S.C. § 6311(h)(5) and 20 U.S.C. § 6311(a)(6).

ESSA requires states and Education to report annually on specific aspects of ESSA implementation and states to submit significant changes to their plans to Education for review (see sidebar for a summary of these requirements).

Under Education's current reporting procedures, states submit information for each school year the following fall.<sup>19</sup> Education officials said that they plan to continue this practice, so state submissions in fall 2018 would be the first to include information based on ESSA requirements, i.e., for school year 2017-2018.

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<sup>19</sup>The Department of Education currently collects K-12 education performance data via the Consolidated State Performance Report. Data currently collected includes, among other items, information related to state activities and outcomes and information used to assess program performance and monitor program requirements. For more information see <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/index.html>.

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## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

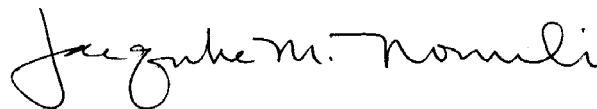
On June 16, 2017 we provided a draft of this report to Education for comment. That same day, Education issued additional guidance for states on developing their state plans, including some guidance related to accountability systems.<sup>20</sup> Education provided technical comments on our draft, which we incorporated as appropriate.

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As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies of this report to the U.S. Secretary of Education. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (617) 788-0580 or [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.

Sincerely yours,



Jacqueline M. Nowicki  
Director  
Education, Workforce, and  
Income Security Issues

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<sup>20</sup>U.S. Department of Education, Every Student Succeeds Act Consolidated State Plan Frequently Asked Questions (June 16, 2017), accessed June 30, 2017, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/index.html>.

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# Appendix I: National and State Stakeholder Groups With Whom GAO Spoke

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AASA, The School Superintendents Association

California Teachers Association

Chiefs for Change

Council of Chief State School Officers

Council of the Great City Schools

Education Commission of the States

National Conference of State Legislators

National Governors Association

Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators

Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators

Ohio Federation of Teachers

The Education Trust

Thomas B. Fordham Institute

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# Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Jacqueline M. Nowicki, (617) 788-0580, [nowickij@gao.gov](mailto:nowickij@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Bill Keller (Assistant Director), Nancy Cosentino (Analyst-in-Charge), James Bennett, Deborah Bland, Mindy Bowman, Sarah Cornetto, Randolpho DeLeon, Anna Duncan, Holly Dye, Brian Egger, Sheila R. McCoy, and Monica Savoy made key contributions to this report.

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