



Testimony before the Committee on
Education and the Workforce, House of
Representatives

For Release on Delivery
Expected at 10:00 a.m. ET
Tuesday, July 18, 2017

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT

Early Observations on State Changes to Accountability Systems

Statement of Jacqueline M. Nowicki, Director,
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Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to be here to discuss our report on early observations on changes some states are making to their K-12 accountability systems in reaction to the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA).¹ As you know, accountability systems measure student and school performance and provide information on that performance to key stakeholders – parents, teachers, government officials, and taxpayers. As a condition of receiving 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 grants states flexibility in designing these systems. ESSA’s provisions regarding accountability systems generally take effect beginning with school year 2017-2018. 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.

My remarks today are based on our recent report entitled *Every Student Succeeds Act: Early Observations on State Changes to Accountability Systems*.² Accordingly, this testimony addresses (1) selected stakeholders’ and states’ views of ESSA’s flexibilities to redesign accountability systems and (2) the U.S. Department of Education’s (Education) next steps in implementing ESSA. To gain insight into these issues, 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. We selected California and Ohio because they were among the states that national stakeholder groups cited as being illustrative of different state approaches to

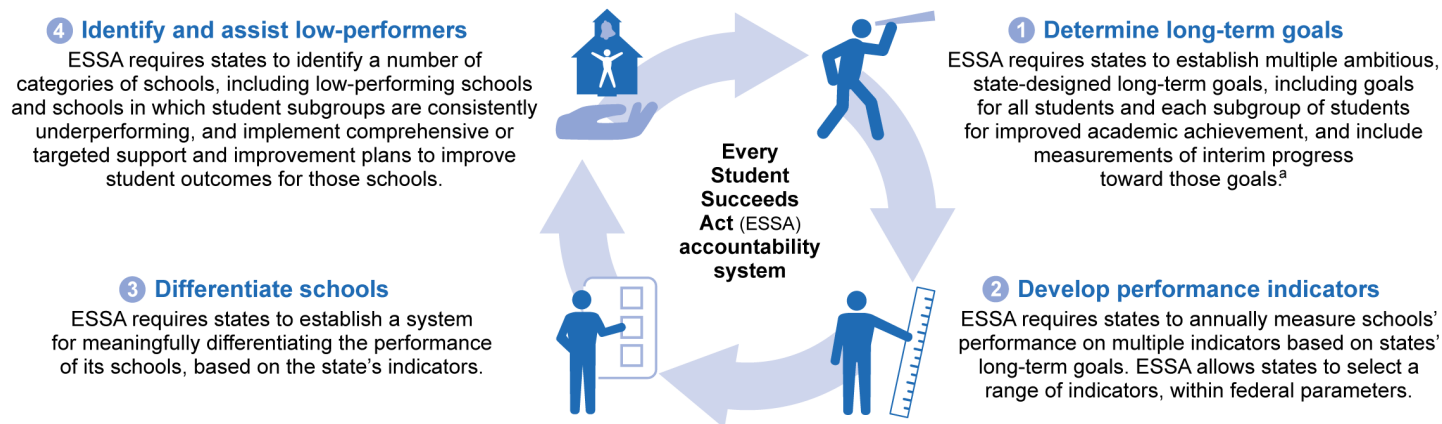
¹ ESSA, enacted in December 2015, reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). Pub. L. No. 114-95, 129 Stat. 1802 (2015). Accountability systems were also required under the previous reauthorization, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

² GAO, *Every Student Succeeds Act: Early Observations on State Changes to Accountability Systems*. [GAO-17-660](#), (Washington, D.C.: July 18, 2017)

developing their proposed accountability systems. 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 plan to comply with ESSA accountability requirements. Additional information on our scope and methodology is available in our full report. We conducted this performance audit from December 2016 to July 2017 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

In our report we focused on 4 components of accountability systems under ESSA that we identified during interviews with national stakeholders as being key components of these systems and as areas where states are making changes to these systems (see Figure 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-17-757T

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.

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

Stakeholders and Selected States View ESSA's Accountability Provisions as Flexible

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. 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 access to 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.

Some states are using ESSA's flexibilities to significantly change their accountability systems while others are making more limited changes. 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, many states already began revising their accountability systems as a result of waivers Education granted under the previous reauthorization of ESEA, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLBA).³ 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.

Ohio and California illustrate how two different states are using the flexibilities in ESSA to tailor their accountability systems to meet state needs for each of the four key components of state accountability systems. To illustrate the different approaches each state is taking, I offer the following examples related to developing performance indicators.

³ For more information about these waivers, see our report, [GAO-17-660](#).

Under ESSA, states are required to measure four indicators related to academics for all students and subgroups and at least one indicator of school quality or student success. The following examples from Ohio and California illustrate how each state is adapting its performance indicators to meet the requirements of ESSA and various needs in each state.

- In Ohio, state officials said they plan to use chronic absenteeism as an indicator of school quality or student success. They said they have studies that show that school attendance is strongly correlated with successful student performance. Because the state already collects attendance data, officials said this indicator would reduce the need for additional data collection. Ohio officials and stakeholders in the state 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 in Ohio have raised concerns about using chronic absenteeism as a measure because schools and districts cannot control whether students come to school. State officials said that in response to these concerns, Ohio's draft plan now includes a commitment to pilot a survey of students known as a "school climate survey" for potential inclusion as an additional indicator of school quality or student success in future years.
- California proposes to use chronic absenteeism as an academic indicator but not an indicator of school quality or student success—as proposed in Ohio. California's draft plan notes a correlation between strong academic performance and school attendance. For the school quality or student success indicator, California plans to measure the number of suspensions in a school or district, with high suspension 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.

Developing and implementing State Monitoring Plans is a Key Next Step for Education in Implementing ESSA

Education officials said their next steps in implementing ESSA are to review and approve state plans and to continue to provide technical assistance to states. 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 September 18, 2017, according to Education's guidance. Both states we visited as part of our review intend to submit their plans by the September deadline.

Education officials also told us they are determining whether there is a need for additional guidance to states on aspects of ESSA implementation. Our report provides more information about Education's technical assistance efforts, including webinars on state plan development 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 improvement efforts under ESSA.

Education officials said that they are developing monitoring protocols for in-depth reviews of states' ESSA-related activities and will pilot them in early 2018. These protocols are intended to guide in-depth reviews of state activities related to ESSA implementation. 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.

Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee, this concludes my prepared remarks. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

GAO Contacts and Acknowledgements

For further information regarding this testimony, please contact Jaqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov. Contact points of our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. Individuals who made key contributions to this testimony include, Bill Keller (Assistant Director), Melinda Bowman (Analyst-in-Charge), Nancy Cosentino, James Bennett, Sarah Cornetto, Anna Duncan, Holly Dye, Sheila R. McCoy, and Monica Savoy.

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