

ESSA POLICY PRINCIPLES

Chiefs for Change Calls on All States to
Design School Improvement and
Education Accountability Systems
that Reflect High Standards for All Students

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The recent enactment of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) provides new opportunities for states to help shape future school systems. The next several months will be a critical time during which many states will begin the process of examining current accountability frameworks and making initial decisions in moving forward under ESSA. As these decisions are being made, Chiefs for Change recommends the following set of broad principles to ensure ESSA is a step forward, not a step back toward ensuring all students in this nation are provided the education they deserve.

✓ **Standards must truly be aligned to college and careers:**

ESSA maintains the prior law requirement that states adopt challenging academic content standards in math, reading and science. Under ESSA, states must also provide an assurance that such standards are aligned with the entrance requirements for credit-bearing coursework in the system of public higher education in the state as well as relevant state career and technical education standards. States, working with key stakeholders, including higher education institutions and career and technical education experts, should begin the process now of determining how their standards will meet this new requirement and be able to demonstrate this alignment to parents and students.

✓ **New and innovative approaches in assessments should be considered:**

ESSA provides states the ability to approach assessments in many new and innovative ways, such as the use of computer-adaptive assessments and replacing single annual summative assessments with multiple assessments leading to a summative score. ESSA also creates an Innovative Assessment Pilot program, further expanding assessment options. States should take advantage of this flexibility and work to design and implement next-generation assessments that are more robust and meaningful for teachers, students and parents.

✓ **Academic goals must be challenging and ambitious:**

ESSA ends the 100% academic proficiency goal set forth under the No Child Left Behind Act – a goal which proved unrealistic at best and at worst, incentivized states to lower their standards. While ESSA does away with a federally prescriptive goal or timeframe, it retains the concept that states should continue to set goals for student achievement and graduation rates as a means of charting the course for what each state wishes to accomplish in meeting the educational needs of all students. States should be deliberative in determining such goals and consider the views of all

stakeholders and, most importantly, consider the views of parents and students. Ultimately, these goals must be challenging and ambitious, and set in motion what is possible, not necessarily what is likely.

✓ **Academic achievement must be the main driver in school accountability:**

ESSA continues the focus on holding schools accountable for student performance on math and reading assessments as well as for graduation rates. However, unlike NCLB, states must design accountability systems that include at least one additional “school quality or student success” indicator. Any such indicator is not required to be related to student learning outcomes but instead may focus on measures such as school climate and other non-academic factors. In addition, any indicator(s) must be given “substantial” weight in how states differentiate among schools in order to identify those in need of additional support.

States should take advantage of this additional flexibility in ways that strengthen – and not weaken – accountability. In our view, a system that relies too heavily on non-academic indicators and/or includes a long list of additional factors will only confuse parents and the public when determining the central question of whether students are learning and are being prepared for the future. Instead, student academic achievement must continue to serve as the main driver in statewide accountability systems.

✓ **Schools must be held accountable for the academic achievement of ALL students including top performers and those furthest behind:**

In designing statewide accountability systems under ESSA, states must incorporate a measure of student growth, if determined appropriate. There are many approaches to using growth, States should take advantage of this flexibility to ensure schools are rewarded for improving the academic progress of all students and subgroups, including making additional academic gains for those students who are already top performers.

In addition to embedding growth into statewide accountability systems, states should leverage the flexibility provided under ESSA to separately measure and hold schools accountable for improving the performance of the students furthest behind. For example, states may choose to focus on the lowest-performing quartile of students – regardless of their background. This is the single best way to ensure that no student is excluded from state and local accountability requirements due to factors related to subgroup or N-size classifications over which students and families have no control.

✓ **States must hold schools accountable for participation in assessments:**

ESSA requires states to annually measure the achievement of not less than 95 percent of all students and students from each subgroup. States have the flexibility to determine how this requirement will be factored into their statewide accountability systems but should be firm in setting meaningful consequences for schools and districts not meeting this minimum participation threshold.

✓ **Statistical methods must not unnecessarily undermine accountability:**

ESSA maintains safeguards for the privacy of personally identifiable information by requiring states to set a minimum number of students (N-size) that must be included prior to the use of disaggregated data. In determining this minimum number states are required to collaborate with teachers, principals and other stakeholders. Although privacy must be assured, states must not use this or other statistical methods in ways that could undermine accountability, particularly for subgroups of students.

About Chiefs for Change:

Chiefs for Change is a nonprofit network of diverse state and district education Chiefs dedicated to preparing all students for today's world and tomorrow's. Chiefs for Change advocates for and scales the most innovative policies and practices that create educational equity for all students.