

# Introduction: Leveraging the Every Student Succeeds Act for School Improvement

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The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers states a prime opportunity that should be wisely leveraged. For the first time in more than a decade, Congress has redefined the federal government's role in K–12 education, rolling back some of the more prescriptive elements of No Child Left Behind and handing states increased authority over school accountability and improvement strategies.

This power shift gives state education agencies (SEAs), state boards of education, governors, and state lawmakers the chance to move accountability systems beyond the dominant carrot-and-stick approach of recent years—an approach whose effectiveness many question. States can take advantage of this opening to rethink accountability and school improvement, putting schools and districts on a path to constructive problem solving that leads toward increased effectiveness.

In the sixth and final volume of *The SEA of the Future*, we explore how states can take advantage of this historic moment to: (1) craft accountability systems that can drive continuous improvement systemwide and (2) redefine their role in supporting educators, schools, and districts.

Undergirding this volume's essays are five principles that should guide states' planning and implementation around the newly revamped ESSA. As states revisit their improvement and accountability strategies for K–12 education, they should ensure their plans are:

- 1. Comprehensive.** The plans should go beyond simply identifying how schools and districts are doing to empowering parents and educators to act on data and solve problems. States should articulate clear benchmarks for determining school, district, or program success and identify specific actions to take in cases of ineffectiveness.
- 2. Deliberate about how rich data are used and by whom.** As states shift to using multiple measures of student progress in their accountability systems, they have the chance to prioritize growth in particular areas and share relevant data with parents and educators—without making assessment systems overly complex. States should collect and distribute data that help districts, schools, and teachers do their jobs well; states need not act on all the data they collect.
- 3. Clear in defining nonoverlapping roles and responsibilities for the state and districts.** The state should define the overall accountability system and hold districts responsible for using evidence in pursuit of improvement. If states issue directives, they must also take responsibility for the effectiveness of those actions.

- 4. Nimble enough to allow for triage.** The plans should concentrate attention and resources where schools and districts are persistently struggling. States should focus on developing tailored improvement strategies, rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.
- 5. Focused on fostering continuous improvement systemwide.** With limited resources, state intervention and targeted capacity building is unlikely to be available to most schools and districts. But states can powerfully affect all schools and districts by issuing and waiving regulations, transparently reporting data on K–12 inputs and outcomes, and widely sharing best practices.

In this volume, we consider and expand on these five principles through three essays.

In the first essay, Ashley Jochim reviews ESSA's new opportunities for states to design and use K–12 accountability systems to drive continuous improvement, pursue reform grounded in local priorities and evidence-based best practices, and respond to growing political pressures around student testing.

In the second essay, Paul Hill and Jochim explore how state chiefs can mine ESSA's new opportunities for state leadership on school and district improvement efforts by judiciously wielding a mix of “hard” and “soft” powers. This means forcing the hand of struggling local districts with direct interventions when necessary and influencing local district leaders and others more informally when appropriate.

In the third and final essay, Betheny Gross considers how states can harness ESSA to strengthen their use of evidence-based policymaking. Doing this can help state agencies foster local innovation and cross-state collaboration to develop and share needed solutions to pressing education problems.

Taken together, these three essays provide SEAs a new framework for strategic planning and concrete tools for implementation as they face a landscape that grants states expansive authority over accountability and improvement strategies.