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## State Leader Interviews: How States are Responding to ESSA's Evidence Requirements for School Improvement

### Purpose of This Project

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gives states more power than they had under previous federal law to determine which schools are low-performing and gives school districts greater latitude to decide on strategies to improve these schools. The strategies chosen, however, must be backed up by evidence of effectiveness that fits into one of four “tiers,” ranging from strong evidence to evidence that demonstrates a rationale. While these requirements offer education leaders the flexibility to pursue innovative strategies, they present new and urgent implementation challenges and opportunities for state and local leaders.

This report describes findings from the first phase of a project by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) designed to learn more about state and local implementation of ESSA's evidence requirements and the roles of education leaders and researchers in advancing evidence use in school improvement. The findings reported here are from interviews conducted by CEP staff with state officials who oversee school improvement in seven states. The interviews focused on state experiences with initial implementation of the ESSA evidence requirements, including state efforts to identify evidence-based interventions and assist districts with their school improvement efforts.

The seven states were purposefully selected to account for geographic diversity and included a mix of states with small and large populations and with stronger and weaker state control of education. The telephone interviews were conducted in February and March of 2019, using a semi-structured interview protocol. To elicit honest responses, we assured interviewees that their names or their states would not be identified. Readers should note that the findings in this report only reflect the experiences of officials in seven states and that other states may have different experiences and approaches to using evidence for school improvement.

In later phases of the project, we plan to gather information about local implementation of the ESSA evidence requirements. We will also convene researchers, state and local education leaders, and other policy experts to promote dialogue across these sectors about the challenges of and promising approaches for using high-quality evidence for school improvement and related decisions.

## State and Local Roles in Meeting ESSA’s Evidence Requirements

Under ESSA, state education agencies (SEAs) develop their own criteria, within broad federal parameters, to measure school performance and identify which schools in the state are the lowest-performing. In particular, states must identify three categories of schools in need of improvement: Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools; Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) schools; and Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI) schools. As described in **Box A** below, the CSI category is based on very low overall performance or poor high school graduation rates, while the TSI and ATSI categories are based on low performance of one or more student subgroups.

### **Box A — Schools Identified for Improvement**

In school year 2018-19, the Every Student Succeeds Act requires states to identify three types of schools for improvement activities:

- **Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools** include a) the lowest performing 5% of schools in the state that receive federal Title I funds and b) high schools that fail to graduate at least two-thirds of their students. School districts and stakeholders work together to determine which actions to take to improve these schools, and the selected activity, strategy, or intervention must meet ESSA’s evidence requirements. The SEA approves the school improvement actions and monitors implementation.
- **Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) schools.** In these schools a subgroup of students is consistently underperforming, as defined by the state. The school and stakeholders work together to determine which actions to take to improve these schools, and the selected activity, strategy, or intervention must meet ESSA’s evidence requirements. The school district approves the school improvement action and monitors its implementation.
- **Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI) schools.** In these schools the performance of any one subgroup of students on its own would lead to the school being identified as a CSI school. The school district approves the school improvement action and monitors its implementation.

*Source: Sections 1111 (d) and (c) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by ESSA*

ESSA leaves it to local education leaders to decide which “activities, strategies, or interventions” will be used to improve student learning at their lowest-performing schools; however, the chosen actions must meet one of four tiers of evidence described in **Box B** on page 3.

States also play a role in helping school districts and schools implement ESSA’s evidence-based requirements. SEAs are expected to 1) provide technical assistance to districts; (2) approve the activities, strategies, or interventions to be implemented in CSI schools; (3) assist with funding through school improvement grants (SIGs); and (4) monitor implementation.

While the ESSA provisions are more flexible than the list of actions required for improving schools under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the new evidence requirements bring new challenges and responsibilities. State and local leaders will need to become more sophisticated consumers of evidence. They must be able to access and keep track of the steadily growing body of current education research and to discern the quality and objectivity of available evidence. They must also be prepared to categorize evidence according to ESSA's tiers, which can be confusing and vague. Local leaders will need to determine which evidence-based interventions are most appropriate in the specific contexts of their struggling schools and navigate a sea of vendors that tout their products as "evidence-based." Since state and local leaders cannot be expected to have expertise in all of these areas, some will likely need to partner with qualified and experienced research entities to assist with this process.

### **Box B — ESSA Evidence Tiers**

Under ESSA, the activities, strategies, or interventions implemented in CSI, TSI, or ATSI schools must meet one of four tiers of evidence:

- **Tier 1.** Strong evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study
- **Tier 2.** Moderate evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study
- **Tier 3.** Promising evidence from at least one well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias
- **Tier 4.** A rationale based on high-quality research findings or positive evaluation that such activity, strategy, or intervention is likely to improve student outcomes or other relevant outcomes; and includes ongoing efforts to examine the effects of such activity, strategy, or intervention.

In districts or schools that receive SIGs from Title I funds, the chosen activities, strategies, or interventions must meet the evidence standards for Tiers 1, 2, or 3.

*Source: Section 8101(21)(A) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by ESSA*

## **Main Themes from State Interviews**

States have adopted a wide variety of approaches to ESSA's accountability and school improvement requirements. States are also at different stages of implementation: some states had already begun identifying schools for improvement using their ESSA accountability systems in 2017-18, and most started doing so in 2018-19.<sup>1</sup> Given these variations, the

<sup>1</sup> Some states are waiting until 2019-20 to identify TSI schools for various reasons. One notable reason is to allow time for states with new assessments or accountability systems to accumulate multiple years of comparable student performance data. (Data from a previous test or different state standards would not be comparable.) Presumably, more than one year of comparable data is necessary to determine whether a student subgroup is "consistently" underperforming.

experiences of seven states are by no means representative. Still, several themes emerged across multiple state interviews that could be informative for other state leaders and researchers. These themes are summarized below and explained in more detail, with supporting quotations from state interviews, in later sections of the report.

- **Local education leaders, and even some state officials, are struggling with the ESSA evidence requirements, according to state interviewees.** The greatest challenge is a lack of familiarity with research and methodology. As one state official observed, superintendents and principals are often hired for their managerial skills, not for their knowledge of school improvement research.
- **Some state leaders are concerned about their ability to help the larger-than-expected number of TSI and ATSI schools.** Some state officials expressed surprise at how many schools have been identified as TSI and/or ATSI schools. These larger numbers are stretching the capacity of SEA staff and raising concerns about how to provide adequate assistance to schools. Most interviewees said they have the capacity to meet the letter of the law but would like to be able to do more for these schools and for CSI schools. Some are working with outside entities to expand their capacity.
- **States differ in the types of assistance they are providing to districts and CSI schools.** Some states reported providing direct technical assistance and optional lists of interventions for CSI schools. Others have embedded SEA employees in CSI schools or are providing instructional coaches for identified schools. Some states are providing aid through regional education agencies.
- **States report that districts are reevaluating longstanding relationships with vendors of education products and services.** According to state interviewees, the ESSA evidence requirements have prompted many state and district leaders to look more closely at vendors they have worked with in the past to ensure that their products and services are supported by evidence of their efficacy.
- **State views differed about the prohibition on using Title I SIG funding for tier 4 interventions.** ESSA requires states to reserve 7% of their federal Title I funds for school improvement purposes. At least 95% of this set-aside must go to school districts, consortia of districts, or education service agencies. However, these grant funds may be used only for activities, strategies, or interventions that meet the evidence criteria for tiers 1-3, but *not* tier 4. Some state interviewees objected to this policy on the grounds that tier 4 encouraged innovative, research-based strategies that had not yet been subjected to the more formal study methodologies required for higher tiers. Other state leaders favored the current prohibition on the grounds that it wasn't appropriate to experiment with the most vulnerable children.

- **Several state interviewees said the current U.S. Department of Education (ED) has not been helpful with ESSA implementation.** Some noted that ED staff are slow to answer questions or had cancelled scheduled phone calls. However, one state official welcomed the hands-off approach because it has given the state and school districts the space to figure out ESSA and their new roles.
- **State leaders had several suggestions for how to make education research more accessible to educators.** Examples included communicating research findings more clearly, eliminating barriers to accessing published research, inviting researchers to test their theories in schools, and other suggestions described later in this report.

## Interview Findings about Implementation of Evidence Requirements

Our interviews were designed to gather information from SEA leaders in seven states about the implementation of ESSA’s evidence and school improvement provisions and related topics. Below we summarize findings from the interviews by topic, along with italicized quotations from the interviews that illustrate the findings and give a flavor of the voices of state leaders.

### *Number of Identified Schools*

Most of the state officials that we interviewed were surprised by the number of schools identified for improvement under their ESSA accountability systems, especially the number of TSI/ATSI schools. The TSI/ATSI designation was most often prompted by the performance of the subgroup of students with disabilities, according to interviewees.

*We didn’t expect that student achievement would be that low among subgroups in so many schools. That was an awakening for all of us.*

Some of the seven states interviewed are annually identifying schools for improvement, while others are doing so every three years. One state decided to identify schools annually—and allow schools to exit this status after one year of improvement—based on comments made by educators and parents at the state’s stakeholder meetings on its ESSA plan:

*When we were having community meetings and focus group discussions to build our ESSA plan, one of the pieces of feedback we got, particularly from schools who had been identified for multiple years, is that over time, bearing the mantle of being a school identified for improvement has a self-defeating impact on staff, families, and the community . . . We thought to address that, we wanted to identify the schools that are struggling, but make it easier for schools to get out of identification.*

### *SEA Capacity*

Most of the state officials interviewed noted that although their SEA staffs are “lean” and the ESSA evidence responsibilities are a “big lift,” their states could meet the letter of the law with current capacity—but they would like to be able to do more. Some officials reported that their

staff was stretched thin in providing assistance due to the higher-than-anticipated number of identified schools. At least one SEA was working with their state legislature to secure additional funding for this purpose.

*Right now, we think we are going to be able to do this [carry out school improvement responsibilities]. We know that there are going to be issues when we start trying to provide all the resources we need. Dollarwise, we definitely have concerns. I think for the past two years we've done a good job at being more involved and building up peoples' capacity.*

Many of the states interviewed reported working with outside entities to extend their capacity, including federally funded regional centers, research organizations, nonprofit organizations, education associations, and universities. States are relying on these entities for help with different aspects of school improvement, such as identifying research-based interventions, determining the ESSA evidence level for lists of research-based interventions, or monitoring the implementation of interventions and gauging their effectiveness.

*One of the things we have in the pipeline is [a request for information] to help expand our evidence-based list. We are working with [a state university] to expand the list to include categories like early learning, literacy, equity, and social emotional learning.*

### **SEA Assistance to Districts with Low-Performing Schools**

The seven states participating in our interviews reported providing various forms of assistance to districts with schools identified for improvement.

As required by ESSA, all of these states are using the school improvement set-aside to provide financial assistance to identified schools, but are taking diverse approaches to distributing it. States have the flexibility to distribute SIG funds through formula or competitive grants or, with district approval, to directly provide services to districts. One interviewee said their state is providing formula grants to schools but in varying amounts depending on the improvement category (CSI, TSI, ASTI). Other states are distributing these funds through a mixture of formula and competitive grants. Some states reported “keeping” the funds at the state level and using them to provide direct services to identified schools. Another state allocated SIG funds to the largest districts in the state and used the remaining set-aside funds to provide direct services to other districts.

The interview states are using various approaches to help districts select school improvement strategies and comply with ESSA’s evidence requirements, as listed below. Some states emphasized note that their approaches were not new but were continuations or refinements of support structures developed prior to ESSA. In addition, officials in multiple states noted that state staff had already become familiar with ways to support identified schools through their experience with NCLB and subsequent federal waivers.

- **State lists of pre-approved interventions.** Several of the states interviewed were making available lists of interventions that were pre-approved by states as meeting evidence requirements, although districts are not limited to using those on the list. All but one said that the list was a non-exhaustive list, but one state indicated that districts were strongly encouraged to select from their list or get pre-approval for an approach that was not on the state list. Other states had decided not to make available this kind of list because they did not want to appear to endorse certain vendors or they did not think such a list could address all of their local contexts.

*In addition to the vendor list, we have put out guidance and technical assistance related to evidence-based practices . . . webinars, guidance documents . . . We've given districts resources that they can look to as they are assessing evidence levels for prospective vendors.*

- **Links to other lists and clearinghouses.** In addition to providing lists of pre-approved interventions, many of the state officials we interviewed said their states are connecting districts with other resources that would help them identify appropriate interventions, such as the What Works Clearinghouse, ESSA Evidence, and ERIC. Some states are working with outside entities to align the information from these sources with ESSA's evidence tiers.

*We put together a guidance document on how to use evidence-based practices. It walks districts through the problem-solving cycle of identifying their needs, selecting their interventions, implementation, and examining progress. There are a lot of links to external resources as well . . . Now we are building on this.*

- **Presentations, webinars, technical assistance, and training.** Interviewees reported that SEA staff have conducted statewide presentations and webinars and provided technical assistance on a range of topics, including the ESSA school improvement requirements and how to determine which interventions and strategies would be a good fit for an identified school.

*The primary approach that we are taking to help districts understand the evidence-based strategies requirements, as well as selecting evidence-based strategies, is first to do broad-based technical assistance and support.*

- **Direct assistance.** Several of the SEAs interviewed are providing direct state assistance to identified schools (mostly CSI schools) in the form of coaches or state-supported personnel embedded in schools.

*The coaches consult with [schools] on what interventions to use, putting the practices in place to make sure the interventions are being implemented successfully, and also making sure that they are evaluating programs and interventions that have already been put into place.*

### ***District Difficulties in Selecting Strategies***

We asked interviewees whether districts in their state were experiencing difficulties in choosing evidence-based school improvement strategies. Some officials said they had not heard of any district problems, but this was likely because districts were still involved in the selection process. (The interviews were conducted in February and March of 2019, and district school improvement plans were not due until later in the spring.)

Some states officials did report difficulties with ESSA evidence requirements at the district level. Two state interviewees said these requirements had prompted uncomfortable conversations between districts and long-time vendors, as districts sought to ensure that vendors' products and services met one of the ESSA evidence tiers.

*[There are] two big challenges. The first is, I like the vendor but I have no way of proving outcomes or if they are evidence-based. Challenge two, on the same side of the coin, I like this vendor and I see improvement but how do I capture that in a way that supports the ESSA tier of evidence.*

Another set of district challenges stems from the fact that district and school leaders may not have sufficient knowledge about research to access, interpret, and apply evidence to make informed decisions about interventions. As one interviewee explained, district and school leaders were "hired to be managers, not researchers." Another state official described the challenges of moving from diagnosing why a school is low-performing to using research to determine an appropriate remedy:

*Schools are not generally made up of people who can read or consume research . . . Our schools are struggling with this, our advocates are struggling with this, the [SEA] is struggling with this . . . We are very good at collecting and looking at data, identifying needs based on data, hypothesizing root causes for why those needs exist. But where it begins to unravel is looking at the strategies, practices, programs, or problems to implement to address those root causes.*

One state official noted that although local officials like greater local control over school improvement in theory, they are finding it more difficult to exercise in practice:

*Overwhelmed is a dramatic understatement. Our leaders are really struggling with this . . . Part of it is our big push to increase local control. But they don't really know what to do with the local control. It's a situation where they say give us the control but tell us exactly what to do. We can't exactly tell them what they want.*

Finally, one interviewee emphasized the importance of assessing the causes underlying a school's low performance before selecting interventions. If districts have not correctly identified the root causes and are not monitoring a school's progress, then it doesn't matter which intervention they select.



## **Evidence Tiers**

ESSA allows strategies in evidence tier 4 to be used in any identified schools at the state's discretion, except that schools receiving SIGs must choose from tiers 1 through 3. State interviewees report different state policies regarding tier 4.

At least one of the states interviewed is limiting CSI schools to using strategies in tiers 1, 2, or 3 only. (Very few strategies meet tier 1 criteria, state officials noted.)

Another state is allowing districts to use tier 4 strategies in non-CSI schools, while making clear that districts opting for tier 4 must annually evaluate the chosen tier 4 strategy and be ready to drop it if it's not working. Some states are encouraging districts to collect data on their implementation of tier 4 strategies, and a few states plan to review that data for possible additions to the list of research-based strategies.

*Only a handful of schools are taking the tier 4 route. We put out a piece of guidance around what tier 4 looks like, and I think that that guidance has scared a lot of people away from doing tier 4. It was written in such a way that only those with capacity could do it.*

One interviewee lamented that SIG funds cannot be used for tier 4 strategies because that official believes tier 4 is where innovation happens.

*Sometimes school leaders and schools find things that work through their own ingenuity and creativity and this limits that. There is no room to do something that is completely original because obviously there is no research base there.*

Other state officials expressed general concern about the rigidity of the categories:

*The categories are a double-edged sword. They encourage people to use more research-based interventions, but it could also lead to oversimplification of interventions.*

## **State Monitoring of District Interventions**

The officials interviewed described different approaches that their SEAS were undertaking to monitor implementation of interventions in low-performing schools. Some states plan to do this as part of their regular ESSA-required monitoring of district Title I implementation. One state that has embedded SEA personnel in low-performing schools is directing these personnel to file periodic reports. In other states, districts must enter information about their interventions into a database.

*What we do is have a robust monitoring process for schools in our state accountability system. . . One key component is not just [the state] looking at the data, but also an assessment of whether the conditions are in place for that school to sustain those efforts over time. We have a monitoring site visit process.*

In addition, a few of the states interviewed are requiring SIG grantees to set aside a portion of their funding to evaluate their improvement efforts.

### ***Using Research***

All of the interviewees had suggestions for how researchers could address the needs and overcome the obstacles faced by local education leaders in accessing and using research. Suggestions included the following:

- Produce plain-language summaries of research
- Remove “paywalls” for scholarly journals to allow educators free or low-cost access to research

*There is a real “paywall” issue. We hope that researchers can make their research open access. That is important.*

- Label research studies with the appropriate ESSA evidence tier
- Include references to the ESSA evidence tiers for research and strategies in the What Works and ERIC clearinghouses
- Disseminate research more widely
- Increase partnerships that bring researchers to work in schools to test their theories

### ***Indirect Consequences of Evidence Requirements***

Interviewees mentioned several indirect, incidental, or unintended consequences of ESSA’s evidence requirements. Some these are potentially positive, some may be problematic, and others have mixed implications.

The evidence requirements, coupled with greater local decision-making authority, are spurring some districts to revisit their existing strategies to improve student achievement. This process can create uncertainty and disruption, as districts give greater scrutiny to arrangements with vendors or halt popular programs. But it also has encouraged state and district officials to make more informed choices, which could lead to better outcomes for students.

Also on the positive side, the process of reviewing school improvement research and selecting strategies is itself a form of professional growth, as local education leaders and educators become more knowledgeable about appropriate strategies and more skilled in evaluating research.

*Instead of creating databases and lists of evidence, we really focused on upscaling our education leaders and our field staff and helping them get access to research and then make their own determinations based in the research. We really want to focus on getting people to understand what the research says and not what people are saying about the research.*

State officials alluded to other unforeseen consequences that could be more problematic:

- Limiting SIG funds to strategies in tiers 1, 2, or 3 may cause some districts to end popular programs, such as after-school programs, that were previously supported with these grants.
- Interventions that meet the evidence tiers may not necessarily work in all school contexts. It may be very difficult for some school districts to find a research-based intervention that addresses the underlying reasons why a school was classified as low-performing *and* will work in their unique setting.

## State Observations about Other Aspects of ESSA

During the course of the interviews, state officials raised broader issues about the role of the U.S. Department of Education and possible changes to ESSA. These are described below.

### ***U.S. Department of Education Support***

Most interviewees said their state was not receiving a great deal of support from the current U.S. Department of Education, although they had diverse views about this hands-off approach. One official wished that ED was more helpful and responsive. Another reported that scheduled phone calls with states have been cancelled and quarterly phone calls have not been scheduled at all. Two states mentioned the lack of written ESSA guidance from the current Administration, which had rescinded guidance formerly issued by the Obama Administration; one of these states reported using the Obama-era guidance to inform their ESSA decisions because the current ED is not helpful.

*The problem isn't really with ESSA—it's with the political upheaval between the department of ED, the Administration, and within the department of ED between career staff and political staff right now. We don't feel like we are getting near the support from them.*

A different perspective came from a state official who said the lack of ED oversight has been a good thing because it has given the state and school districts space to figure out new approaches to assisting low-performing schools without federal interference.

*I think most SEAs would say the less we hear from the Department of Ed the better, at least overall. Anytime you get an email from them you kind of cringe.*

### ***Changes to Federal Policy***

Finally, state officials suggested various changes to federal policies that would better promote the goal of school improvement in their view:

- Give districts more flexibility to implement “home-grown” approaches to school improvement that meet tier 4 criteria.

- Overhaul federal clearinghouses to report information in terms of the ESSA evidence tiers.
- Conduct a literature review through the U.S. Department of Education of all school improvement research.
- Provide states with clear and consistent guidance about implementation requirements and parameters.

In addition, one state proposed that a change that reflects the growing presence of for-profit providers in the education marketplace. That state suggested an amendment to ESSA that would:

- Allow federal funds to be used only for interventions that are promoted or developed by nonprofit entities.

*It's exactly like what happened to our standards. [For-profit vendors] are taking exactly what they sold prior to ESSA and recalibrating it.*

## Conclusion

State and local leaders in the seven states in which CEP conducted interviews appear to making serious efforts to implement ESSA's evidence requirements. Although the requirements have presented some challenges, they appear to have increased awareness of the range of research-based strategies available to education leaders. State and local officials have also been asked to carefully examine the underlying evidence when selecting school improvement strategies, which can sometimes mean questioning or even changing longstanding relationships with vendors. Understanding research methods, weighing evidence, and selecting strategies that will work in specific contexts are all complex endeavors, so it is not surprising that state and local leaders sometimes feel challenged. But if these requirements encourage state and local leaders to become better consumers of education research, ESSA's evidence requirements may benefit the field beyond the boundaries of the program.

The research community could also take additional steps to make this process easier. Examples include pursuing additional partnerships with states and school districts and reporting research findings in ways that are accessible to non-researchers. Before conducting these interviews, CEP spoke extensively with both the Council of Chief State School Officers and AASA, The School Superintendents Association. Representatives of both organizations pointed out that states and districts need timely, relevant, and accessible research to support their goals and activities. They expressed a concern that too much research will render education leaders "data rich, but information poor." By continuing to work hand in hand with researchers, state and local leaders can help shape the future of education research so it supports both policy and practice.

Finally, CEP's interviews demonstrate how the role of state departments has changed in recent years. The flexibility and authority given to state and local leaders under ESSA requires state

departments of education to play a bigger, more nuanced role in school improvement. It is understandable that some states feel overwhelmed or unprepared to take on these new responsibilities. All of the education groups CEP spoke with before conducting the state interviews addressed the issue of state and local capacity and how it may impact decision-making and implementation. Moving forward, the federal government and others will need to consider how they can better support the expanding role state departments of education play in school improvement.

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