re:VISION

The Every Student Succeeds Act and Low-Performing Schools

By Mike Martin, Associate Director, Policy and Program
Mark Johnson, State Farm Scholar and Policy Analyst

All children should be afforded the opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. Unfortunately, there are still many schools – often those serving high percentages of students living in poverty – where children leave inadequately prepared for college, career, and life.

The causes of low-performing schools are complicated, and the proposed solutions, from increasing school funding and alleviating poverty to replacing personnel and introducing school choice, are often politically contentious. The recent passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) requires states to identify struggling schools and use federal monies to improve them – a task as urgent as it is challenging.

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) replaced the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) in December 2015. Though ESSA preserves federal funding at levels similar to NCLB and maintains a focus on closing achievement gaps, the new law is significantly less prescriptive than its predecessor. Nowhere is this truer than in the requirements for intervening in low-performing schools. Absent the former requirements of prescriptive federal turnaround models, under ESSA, states and districts will need to develop and implement evidence-based approaches to improve underperforming schools. This issue of *re:VISION* intends to equip state policymakers with a set of considerations when crafting their ESSA plan for intervention in low-performing schools.

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IDENTIFYING LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS UNDER ESSA

Under ESSA, states are required to establish indicators of student achievement and success, incorporate those indicators into a system of meaningful annual differentiation, and use that system to identify schools in need of improvement. The law requires states to identify schools for **comprehensive support and improvement (CSI)** and those that will receive **targeted support and improvement (TSI)**.

ESSA Requirements At a Glance

Indicators

Measures the states will use in the accountability system.
Required measures include:

All Schools
- Academic achievement on state tests (with optional student growth)
- English Language Proficiency
- School Quality or Student Success

Elementary Schools
- Additional Academic Measure (or student growth)

High Schools
- Four-Year Graduation Rate

For more on the indicators and system, please see our companion piece, School Accountability Systems and The Every Student Succeeds Act.

System of Annual Meaningful Differentiation

How those required indicators will be used to annually differentiate the performance of all schools. Some states will likely choose levels (e.g. Level 1 through Level 4) or performance grades (A through F) or some other system of differentiation based on the indicators.

Identification of Schools

Lowest Performing 5%

Comprehensive Support and Improvement

Underperforming Subgroup

Targeted Support and Improvement

States must identify for Comprehensive Support and Improvement
- **not less than the lowest-performing five percent** of Title I funded schools for CSI, as determined by the system of annual meaningful differentiation
- any high school that graduates less than two-thirds of its students

States must identify for Targeted Support and Improvement
- any school with a **consistently underperforming subgroup** as determined by the state's system of annual meaningful differentiation

How are CSI schools identified?

Comprehensive Support and Improvement

ESSA intends for CSI schools to be those in the most urgent need of improvement. **States must identify CSI schools at least once every three years and establish exit criteria for leaving the designation behind.** Under ESSA, schools that meet either of the following two criteria must be identified for CSI:

- **Graduation rate:** Any high school that graduates *less than two-thirds* of its students must be identified for CSI. While the national graduation rate has significantly improved over the last five years, there were still more than 1,000 high schools (over 4 percent) that were graduating less than six out of every 10 students.[1]
- **Student outcomes:** Based on the state's system of meaningful differentiation, schools that fall in the lowest five percent of Title I funded schools must be identified for CSI.

Though ESSA gives states more interpretive license in identifying the lowest five percent schools for CSI, there are several key questions policymakers should consider:

How many systems are making school designations in our state?

Historically, many states have run two parallel accountability systems – one that meets federal accountability requirements and one that is state specific, such as an A-F grading system. These dual systems cause confusion for parents and frustration for educators. ESSA provides an opportunity for policymakers to bring their current accountability systems into **a single coherent system that represents the state's values and vision for schools**.

How does our state weight achievement and growth?

Many states currently use growth models in accountability systems, which give policymakers a sense of how well a school is serving students over time. Both growth and proficiency should be considered in designing systems of meaningful differentiation and identification of CSI schools. Additionally, policymakers may want to consider identifying schools with exceptionally low overall status (in the same way the law requires the identification of schools with graduation rates below 66.6 percent regardless of how the graduation rate is changing over time.)

***Snapshot:* School Improvement Efforts From Across the States**

Houston

Houston Independent School District's (HISD) **Apollo 20** program was developed to improve low-performing traditional public schools through the implementation of five "best practices" from successful charter schools.[2] Apollo 20 schools were required to replace the principal, provide additional tutoring for students performing below grade level, lengthen the school day and year, administer frequent interim and benchmark assessments, facilitate training on the effective use of data, and set clear accountability expectations for school leadership. Evaluations of the program found mixed results, with positive gains in the case of math scores and little to no effect on reading scores.

How are TSI schools identified?

Targeted Support and Improvement

Under ESSA, schools with consistently underperforming subgroups must be identified for TSI. In the case of NCLB, every subgroup had to meet the same yearly targets progressing toward 100 percent proficiency. In the case of ESSA, **states must identify any school that, by the state-established definition, has one or more consistently underperforming subgroups**.

As each state considers its definition of consistently underperforming subgroups, there are several questions policymakers should consider:

What is a consistently underperforming subgroup?

Current proposed regulations specify how states can define under-performing subgroups, but ultimately allow the state flexibility. Suggested methods in the proposed regulations for defining subgroup underperformance include:

- A subgroup that is failing to meet interim progress measures or is not on track to meet the state-designed long-term goals;
- A subgroup of students that is performing at the lowest performance level on at least one indicator;
- A subgroup that is below a state determined threshold; or
- A subgroup that is performing significantly below the state average for all students.

The state can propose another method as well. Importantly, the above methods represent different levels of urgency – with the first method being most similar to the exacting demands of NCLB and most likely to ensure, over time, that every school where achievement gaps are not closing will be identified.

Does our state's definition adequately identify schools with persistent achievement gaps?

NCLB allowed schools to be identified as meeting expectations only if every subgroup met targets for the percent of students achieving proficiency. Though ESSA offers states a chance to rethink accountability and intervention in schools, the flexibility introduces the risk that states might turn the spotlight away from persistent achievement gaps. Policymakers should, with the help of civil rights groups and disability rights organizations, design overall systems of meaningful differentiation that include the outcomes of historically underperforming subgroups, explicitly in summative ratings of all schools as well as in identifying CSI and TSI schools. Importantly, a provision in the law requires that any school with a subgroup that, on its own, performs at a level that would fall into the lowest five percent of schools, must identify resource inequities to be addressed in their intervention plans.

The identification and intervention in TSI schools reinforces what many consider the most important legacy of NCLB – **the disaggregation of achievement data by race, economic status and disability status and accountability for the performance of each subgroup**.

***Snapshot:* School Improvement Efforts From Across the States**

Tennessee

In Tennessee, efforts funded by Race to the Top to turnaround low-performing schools have taken the form of both district-led **Innovation Zone** (i-Zone) schools and the formation of a state-led **Achievement School District** (ASD), in which schools are either directly-run by the state or turned over to a charter management organization (CMO). According to a report by researchers from Vanderbilt University, Tennessee's i-Zone reform has shown promise as a strategy for improvement.[3] i-Zone schools remain under the control of the local education agency (LEA) but are given charter-like levels of flexibility to implement reforms. Results for iZone schools suggest positive and statistically significant effects on student achievement across all subjects. The effects of ASD schools on student achievement, on the other hand, have been, for the most part, statistically insignificant. However, as mentioned in the Vanderbilt report, it may be too early to judge the longer-term effects of the intiative.

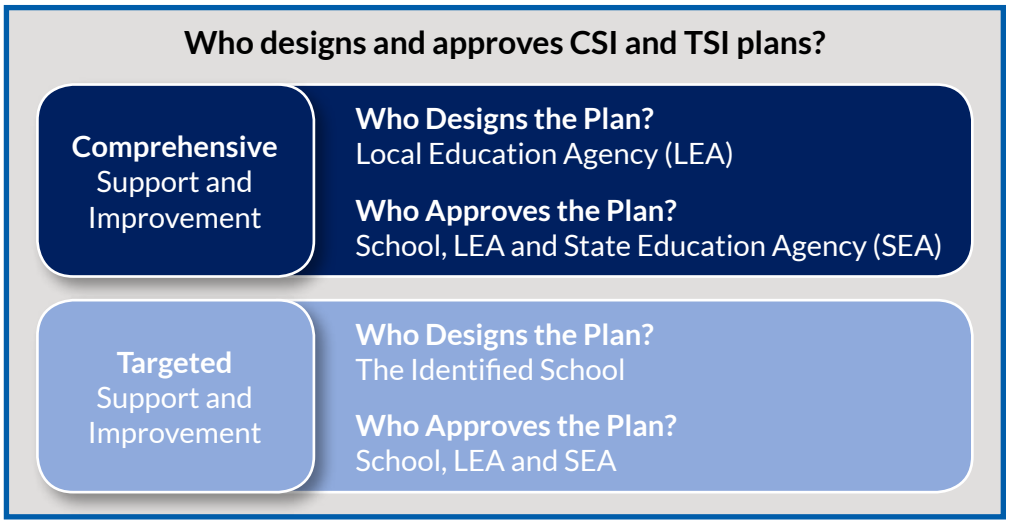
INTERVENING IN LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS UNDER ESSA

After the state identifies schools for CSI and TSI, states, districts and schools must act to achieve sustainable, significant improvement within the identified schools by designing improvement plans, establishing funding, and clearly laying out exit criteria.

Improvement Plans

Unlike previous federal programs, which required specific interventions and turnaround models in low-performing schools, ESSA outlines basic tenets for intervention in both CSI and TSI schools but leaves the specifics up to the state and districts. At a minimum, a LEA's plans must

- Be developed in partnership with key stakeholders including principals, teachers and parents;
- Include evidence-based interventions;
- Be informed by a school-level needs assessment, identify resource inequities; and
- Be approved by the school, LEA and the state education agency (SEA).



Funding

ESSA requires that states set aside seven percent of their Title I Part A funding to support interventions in CSI and TSI schools. States have the option of distributing the grant funding through formula grants or competitive grants. Current draft regulations require that schools identified for CSI receive at least $500,000 annually and those identified for TSI receive $50,000 annually.

Additionally, in allocating funds, states must give priority to LEAs that

- Serve high numbers, or a high percentage, of schools implementing CSI or TSI plans;
- Demonstrate the greatest need; and
- Demonstrate the strongest commitment to using the funds to enable lowest-performing schools to improve.

Exit Criteria. States and LEAs must monitor the improvement plans and determine the time line and criteria for exiting CSI and TSI status. In CSI schools, the timeline for the application of exit criteria cannot exceed four years. If the school has not met the state-determined exit criteria, the school will be required to take more rigorous state-determined interventions.

Snapshot:

School Improvement Efforts From Across the States

New Orleans

One of the most publicized efforts to improve high-need schools has been the New Orleans R**ecovery School District** (RSD). Created by the Louisiana Legislature in 2003, the RSD allows the state to take over the operations of low-performing traditional public schools statewide and transform them into charter schools. Following the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the state legislature made the decision to transfer more than 100 low-performing Orleans Parish schools to the RSD.[4]

Ten years after the hurricane, a report by New Schools for New Orleans and Public Impact described students in New Orleans as performing "better than ever."[5] Positive indicators cited in the report included more students on grade level, more students graduating on time, and fewer students trapped in low-performing schools. However, despite these improvements, the authors cautioned the reader not to "confuse progress with success." According to the report, there is still much work to be done to raise the quality of New Orleans' public school system – especially given the fact that RSD remains "a below-average school district in a bottom-performing state." Moreover, according to findings published by a center at Stanford University, data suggest that the RSD has given rise to a set of schools that are decidedly variable in quality and are "highly stratified by race, class, and educational advantage."[6] Senate Bill 432, passed in May of 2016, will return control of many RSD schools back to the Orleans Parish School Board. These schools will maintain much of their decision-making autonomy in matters of personnel, curriculum and other operations.

SYNOPSIS: INTERVENTIONS IN LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

What do we know about successful school-level strategies for improving low-performing schools? What should school improvement look like on the ground? Various organizations have developed frameworks of recommendations based on analyses of the commonalities found among schools that have had success improving outcomes for students. Three examples of this type of framework are the ones offered by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the U.S. Department of Education (USED), and the Century Foundation.[7] Several common themes emerge from these frameworks, providing insight into potential strategies for school intervention under ESSA.

- **Leadership**. Ensure strong leadership by focusing on the identification, preparation, recruitment and retention of school leaders with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to lead change. In addition, provide the principal with operational flexibility in the areas of scheduling, staff, curriculum, and budget.
- **Teachers and Staff**. Prepare, recruit, develop, and retain teachers with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to succeed in high-needs schools. This will also require that measures are taken to ensure that teachers feel supported, valued and empowered while working in these schools.
- **Instruction**. Ensure that teachers are using research-based, rigorous instruction and are held to high standards. Focus on improving instruction through ongoing professional and data-driven collaboration.
- **Time**. Redesign the school day, week, or year so as to increase time for student learning and teacher collaboration.
- **Culture**. Establish a safe and orderly school environment that effectively supports the social, emotional, health, and learning needs of all students.
- **Community**. Develop and maintain mechanisms for meaningful family and community engagement.

CONCLUDING POLICYMAKER CONSIDERATIONS

The work to improve low-performing schools is central to the goal of ensuring every student, regardless of his or her zip code, has an opportunity to achieve a great education. ESSA requires that states use a significant amount of Title I money for this task - but resources of this size (and larger) have been dedicated to this task in the past with limited impact on student achievement. As states determine their approach to supporting LEAs and schools, success is likely dependent on a few important state considerations:

Plan with Urgency

Past data indicate that schools have typically taken the least radical options when restructuring.[8] Absent the influence of the federal turnaround models, which suggested significant changes (sweeping personnel replacement, new leadership, chartering), it is imaginable that LEAs and schools might take only marginally aggressive steps when intervening. **States will want to establish guidelines or requirements that ensure LEA plans match the urgency of the under-performance that led to identification.**

Plan with Evidence

ESSA requires that LEAs use evidence-based strategies in planning improvement efforts. The law establishes tiers for the quality of the evidence for particular actions or intervention. CSI and TSI plans must use interventions from the top three tiers of evidence. **States may want to issue guidance for LEAs and schools about using evidence to design CSI and TSI plans, or even design a menu of interventions with the strongest evidence base.**

Stakeholder Involvement

ESSA explicitly requires that the state education agency – who submits the final plan – develop the state's ESSA plan in consultation with many stakeholders, including practicing educators, parents, and both the governor and state legislature. Nowhere is this more important than in devising how the state will support and improve low-performing schools. In many states, different governmental bodies have championed different policy responses to low-performing schools – often with little coordination and communication. SEAs must proactively gather input and plan for the ongoing engagement of policymakers and practitioners in designing intervention strategies. **Policymakers, particularly state legislators and state board of education members, must engage fully in the direction, design and ownership of the state's plan.**

Focus on Educators and Instruction

While there is much to be learned about what it takes to successfully intervene in low-performing schools, many researchers and practitioners have concluded that the effectiveness of the educators and leaders in the building and the quality of instruction happening in classrooms is at the heart of school improvement. All frameworks for intervention identify great school leaders and talented, dedicated teachers as the starting place for improvement. That means recruiting, preparing, supporting, evaluating and retaining effective teachers and leaders in the most challenging schools. **Policymakers should ensure that the state plans, and resources for implementing those plans, place supports for effective educators and quality of instruction at the center of any reforms or interventions in CSI and TSI schools.**

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