



The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law by President Barack Obama in December of 2015 and reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) first signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965. Like its predecessors, ESSA provides federal funding for elementary and secondary school students, emphasizes equal opportunity to learning, and sets high standards for achievement and accountability.

ESSA includes the following sections:

- Title I: Provides financial assistance to local school districts, requires standardized tests to measure school progress against achievement benchmarks.
- Title II: Provides dollars to support libraries, textbooks and other instructional materials
- Title III: Supports supplementary education services including school psychologists, adjustment counselors, and other ancillary services; supports bi-lingual education
- Title IV: Provides financial support for education research and training, 21st Century Schools
- Title V: Provides dollars to strengthen state departments of education
- Title VI: Provides financial assistance to support the education of students with disabilities

The predecessor to ESSA, the No Child Left Behind Act represented a major reworking of ESEA. Its enactment in 2001 ushered in an era of teacher, school, and district accountability and student testing against which many political leaders, teachers, and civil rights leaders balked. For some, the provisions of the law represented unacceptable intrusion of the federal government into areas of education historically subject to local control; to others, the testing requirements were onerous and interfered with teacher flexibility for instruction and with student learning.

General Principles and Provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act

The ESSA represents a bi-partisan effort to remedy the issues raised about the No Child Left Behind Act and to promote 21st century teaching, learning, and educational outcomes. ESSA:

- shifts some responsibility to states and districts to develop independent school improvement plans rather than rely on solutions directed by the federal Department of Education
- seeks to reduce the burden of testing on students and teachers while assuring that annual information about student progress and continuous school improvement is collected and monitored
- increases access to high-quality pre-school
- assures focus on and accountability for low-performing students and schools as well as schools with achievement gaps
- holds students accountable to high academic and instructional standards that prepare for college and career success
- establishes new resources for demonstrated best practices for reform and high student performance and outcomes
- expands incentives to prepare, develop, and advance effective teachers and principals
- leverages resources to address the needs and challenges of students living in areas of concentrated poverty by supporting a full continuum of services from early learning through college
- expands support for high-performing charter schools that serve high need students.

Provisions Most Relevant to Massachusetts and to Worcester:

Title I

ESSA ends school improvement grants offered under Title I. Instead, states must set aside a portion of their federal education allocation for technical assistance and support of local districts. States must submit a Title I plan to the U.S. Department of Education ensuring coordination between federal education laws funded through other acts, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), McKinney-Vento (education for homeless children), and the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, among others. State plans must also assure:

- the adoption of demanding academic content and aligned standards that apply to all public schools and public school students in the state. Standards must be aligned with coursework required for entry to state colleges and universities. In Massachusetts, MassCore is the relevant state college and university curriculum requirement.
- states may adopt alternate standards for students with severe disabilities provided that they are aligned with state standards, meet the provisions of IDEA, and allow students opportunity to pursue higher education
- states must adopt English language proficiency standards aligned with challenging state standards.

Academic Assessments and Accountability for Teaching and Learning

Like No Child Left Behind, ESSA continues to press for assessment of progress and accountability for outcomes, but it shifts leadership to state education departments.

- Accountability goals are left to the states with limited federal oversight.
- The No Child Left Behind assessment schedule remains in place and states must continue to offer students assessments in math, reading and language arts, and science as well as implement assessments in other subjects. However, assessments may in part be in the form of portfolios, projects, or other means. States also have the choice of using a single assessment or several over the course of the academic year. Districts may administer a nationally recognized high school assessment in lieu of the required statewide assessment.
- Each state must have a statewide accountability system based on standards for math and language arts to measure student progress and school improvement.
- States must establish a methodology to identify schools in need of support and improvement including the lowest 5% of schools receiving Title I funds and high schools graduating less than two-thirds of students. The law requires intervention to improve these schools but does not define the form of that intervention.
- Each state must complete an annual statewide education report card and include a concise description of the state's accountability system, including the long-term goals and measurements of interim progress for all students and subgroups of students, the state's system for meaningfully differentiating all public schools, the number and name of all public schools identified for improvement, and the criteria for exiting needs improvement status. The report card will identify all indicators and other factors including the professional qualifications of teachers, per-pupil expenditures, National Assessment of Educational Progress scores, and, where available beginning with the 2017 report card, information about post-secondary attainment. Local education authorities must also prepare report cards containing information on student performance on academic assessments.

Other Changes

- States may adopt the Common Core State Standards, but adoption is no longer a requirement for any source of federal funding
- ESSA allows districts to consolidate and use Title I and other federal, state, and local funds for schoolwide Title I programs in schools serving a catchment area where 40 percent or more of the children are from low income families, or where 40 percent of the children enrolled are from such families. These funds can be used for preschool programs or dual/concurrent enrollment programs.

Summary

The Every Student Succeeds Act recognizes ideas, and addresses concerns, raised by educators, state legislators, and governors nationwide. ESSA represents significant bi-partisan work and cooperation. Lead sponsors in the Senate were Lamar Alexander (R-Tennessee) and Patty Murray (D-Washington); lead sponsors in the House were Representatives John Kline (R-Minnesota) and Bobby Scott (D-Virginia). It passed 359-64 in the House and 85-12 in the Senate.

The new law works to preserve the spirit of its ESEA predecessor, No Child Left Behind, while remedying some of its flaws. The Act maintains the expectation and requirement of high standards, educational accountability, and focused attention on closing gaps. The shift from federal driven reform initiatives to state-led work within a federally described framework is significant and will require restructuring and re-organizing at the state and district level.

Sources: *“Summary of the Every Student Succeeds Act, Legislation Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act,” National Council of State Legislatures; “Fact Sheet: Congress Acts to Fix No Child Left Behind” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, December 2, 2015; “How Schools Would be Judged Under ‘Every Child Succeeds’ the New ‘No Child Left Behind,’” The Washington Post, Emma Brown, 11/30/2015*