

What's Next for Low-Performing Schools? State Plans Related to the Every Student Succeeds Act

Purpose

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of December 2015 identifies new responsibilities and opportunities for state education agencies (SEAs) as their leaders work to turn around low-performing schools. Much of the early media attention given to ESSA focused on its clear attempt to address the criticisms leveled at the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, including perceived federal overreach (Klein, 2016). Under ESSA, federal school improvement models and federal school turnaround principles are no longer mandated; furthermore, there is no separate “school improvement” funding stream within Title I that is governed by federal guidance (ESSA, 2015). Instead, states and districts are in the driver’s seat when it comes to school improvement. SEAs may change the way they identify low-performing schools, provide funding for improvement, and guide interventions in low-performing schools and those with achievement gaps.

The change from the Obama to the Trump administration further loosened requirements for states. The *Revised State Template for the Consolidated State Plan*, which the Trump administration issued in March 2017, is considerably shorter than the Obama version and calls for less explanation of states’ proposed actions (Klein, 2017a). The topics (such identification and support of low performing schools), however, remain essentially unchanged, since these are the key elements of ESSA.

How much will change and what will changes look like? This study reviews SEA leaders’ early reactions to ESSA as it applies to improving low-performing schools and informs the field about SEA needs for support during the transition to ESSA.

Theoretical Framework

Unlike previous versions of the law, ESSA does not specify the school improvement strategies states must pursue in support of district efforts to improve low-performing schools. It does, however, require that SEAs develop practices and policies related to a variety of issues in low-performing schools including:

- Identification of low-performing schools (now called Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools and Targeted Support and Improvement Schools)
- Support of the use of evidence to
 - Assist districts with these both groups of low-performing schools
 - Close achievement gaps in these schools
 - Intervene in Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools
- Creation of reports cards, including the use of a factor other than student achievement

- Establishment of funding policies for both groups of low-performing schools
- Provision of testing policies surrounding the use of national tests, the use of interim assessments, and the opportunity for parents to “opt-out” of testing (ESSA, 2015)

Veteran educators and policymakers will recall that the NCLB Act introduced similar requirements, such as identification of the lowest performing schools and formulation of improvement policy and practice grounded in “scientifically-based research” (Table 1).

Table 1. ESEA Waiver and ESSA Approaches for Low-performing Schools

Topic	Approaches in Waiver Guidance	Approaches in ESSA
School leadership (including evaluation and replacement)	Provide strong leadership by: (1) reviewing the performance of the current principal; (2) either replacing the principal or demonstrating to the SEA that the current principal has a track record in improving achievement, and (3) providing the principal with operational flexibility in the areas of scheduling, staff, curriculum, and budget.	No requirements for evaluation tied to student achievement or for replacement of school leadership
Teacher effectiveness (including evaluation and replacement)	Ensure that teachers are effective by: (1) reviewing the quality of all staff and retaining only those who are determined to be effective (2) preventing ineffective teachers from transferring to these schools, and (3) providing job-embedded, ongoing professional development, informed by the teacher evaluation and support systems	No requirements for evaluation tied to student achievement or for replacement of teachers
Expand learning time	Ensure the school day, week, or year to include additional time for student learning and teacher collaboration	No specific requirements for expanding the school day
Use data	Use data to inform instruction and for continuous improvement, including time for collaboration on the data use	Use of evidence-based approaches for low-performing schools, for districts with low-performing schools, and for schools with achievement gaps; Use of data for decision making
Improve school climate	Establish a school environment that improves safety and discipline addressing non-academic factors that impact achievement, such as social, emotional, and health needs	Inclusion of “other factors” to identify low-performing schools such as safety / discipline, and non-academic factors that impact achievement, (i.e., social, emotional, and health needs)
Revamp the curriculum	Strengthen the school’s instructional program based on student needs and ensuring that the instructional program is research-based, rigorous, and aligned with State academic content standards	Use of evidence-based curricula for low performing schools, for districts with low-performing schools, and for schools with achievement gaps; Use of data for decision making
Involve family and community	Provide ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement	Continuation of mechanisms for family and community engagement

Source: Author analysis of *ESEA flexibility* (2012) and *ESSA* (2015)

Other requirements under NCLB, such as tying student achievement to teacher evaluation and replacing ineffective principals and teachers are absent from ESSA. Recent research on schools implementing such efforts through school improvement grants has found that staffing changes and teacher evaluation are among the elements most difficult to implement (Scott, McMurrer, McIntosh, Dibner, 2012; Herrmann, Dragoset, & James-Burdumy, 2014; LeFloch, et. al., 2016). Expanded learning time is also absent from ESSA. While some studies found expanded learning time effective (Kidron & Lindsay, 2014)), others found barriers to implementation, such as difficulties scheduling activities and transportation (McMurrer, Frizzell, Yoshioka, Scott, & Ostler, 2015). The elements of NCLB that continue even if new newer forms, particularly promoting the use of evidence, appear to be particularly promising due to the greater flexibility under ESSA (Hale, Dunn, Filby, Rice, and Houten, 2017; Fleischman, Scott, Sargrad, 2017).

The elimination of NCLB's difficult-to-implement strategies, and the increased flexibility in ESSA raise questions about the extent to which SEA leaders will change policies and practices related to low-performing schools and about the types of support SEAs will need to implement the new law effectively. To address these questions, we conducted and analyzed a survey of SEA leaders regarding their states' plans as of the spring of 2016. We also correlated those survey results to an extant review of state policies conducted by the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Central that summarized and categorized the policies for state interventions in low-performing schools across all 50 states (Klute, et. al., 2016).

Our study asked the following questions:

- 1) To what extent do SEA leaders anticipate their states will change their policies and practices in response to ESSA, and how do these reported changes vary based on past SEA policies?
- 2) To what degree do SEA leaders report their states are planning to make changes in specific school turnaround practices and policies related to ESSA?
- 3) Among these specific school turnaround practices and policies related to ESSA, to what extent do SEA leaders report needing assistance as they plan changes?

Data Sources

This descriptive study combines data from surveys and documents, using a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2003). First, the study uses annual survey data that is as part of the external evaluation of the federally-funded Center on School Turnaround (CST)¹. For the initial data collection, the external evaluators administered the survey from February 25th to March 18th,

¹ The CST is a federally-funded center, charged with disseminating information about school turnaround and supporting SEA leaders and other with assisting in school turnaround.

2016, to all 317 of the CST's SEA contacts. Then, the evaluators targeted phone-call follow-ups to individuals that CST staff members believed to be most knowledgeable about school turnaround. The targeted sample included knowledgeable respondents from all 50 states plus Puerto Rico. Almost two thirds of respondents worked in offices of school turnaround or improvement; about a fifth worked in Title I offices; almost a tenth worked in accountability; and the rest had other roles in offices, such as outreach or grants. All reported they were familiar with their state's school turnaround policies.

Second, the study uses data from a REL Central publication that examined state policies for low-performing schools (Klute, et. al., 2016). The REL study identified and coded the presence of six types of state policies:

- Development or monitoring of school improvement plans
- Changes in staffing
- Closing a school
- Financial incentives or interventions
- Reforms to the day-to-day operation of the school
- Changes related to the entity that governs or operates the school.

Methods

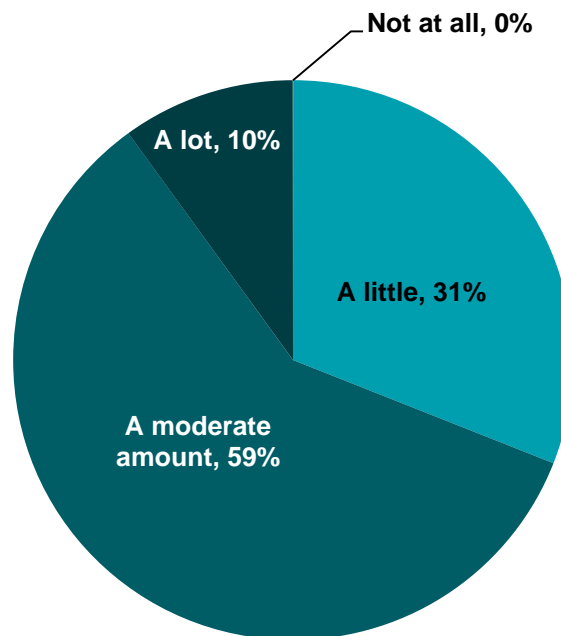
We limited the analysis of the survey data to a single average response from each SEA, in order to provide a national view with each state represented equally, regardless of the number of survey participants from that state. To generate a single representative response for the 19 SEAs in which we had more than one survey participant, we averaged the responses. We analyzed the closed-ended survey items for all participants using descriptive statistics and an open-ended item using content analysis (Mayring, 2000).

We also used six Chi squares analyses to examine the relationship between the reported extent of state changes and the six types of states policies identified in Klute, et. al. (2016). The state policies were coded dichotomously, (i.e., "1" meant the state had the policy and "0" meant the state did not have the policy). We also dichotomously coded survey responses to the item about the extent of planned changes in policy, (i.e., "1" for at least a moderate amount of change and "0" for less than a moderate amount). Two of the six analyses (the one involving closing the school and the one involving reforms in the day-to-day operations of schools) had cell sizes large enough to meet the assumptions of the statistical test.

Results

RQ1: We used survey data to examine the extent to which SEA leaders anticipate their states will change their policies and practices in response to ESSA overall. All SEA leaders said their states planned to change their school turnaround policies and practices at least “a little” in response to ESSA (Figure 1). The largest percentage (59%) reported their states were changing “a moderate amount.”

Figure 1
Percentages of SEAs Planning to Make Overall Changes to Policies or Practices Due to ESSA
(n = 49)



Source: Evaluator analysis of Center on School Turnaround 2016 SEA survey data

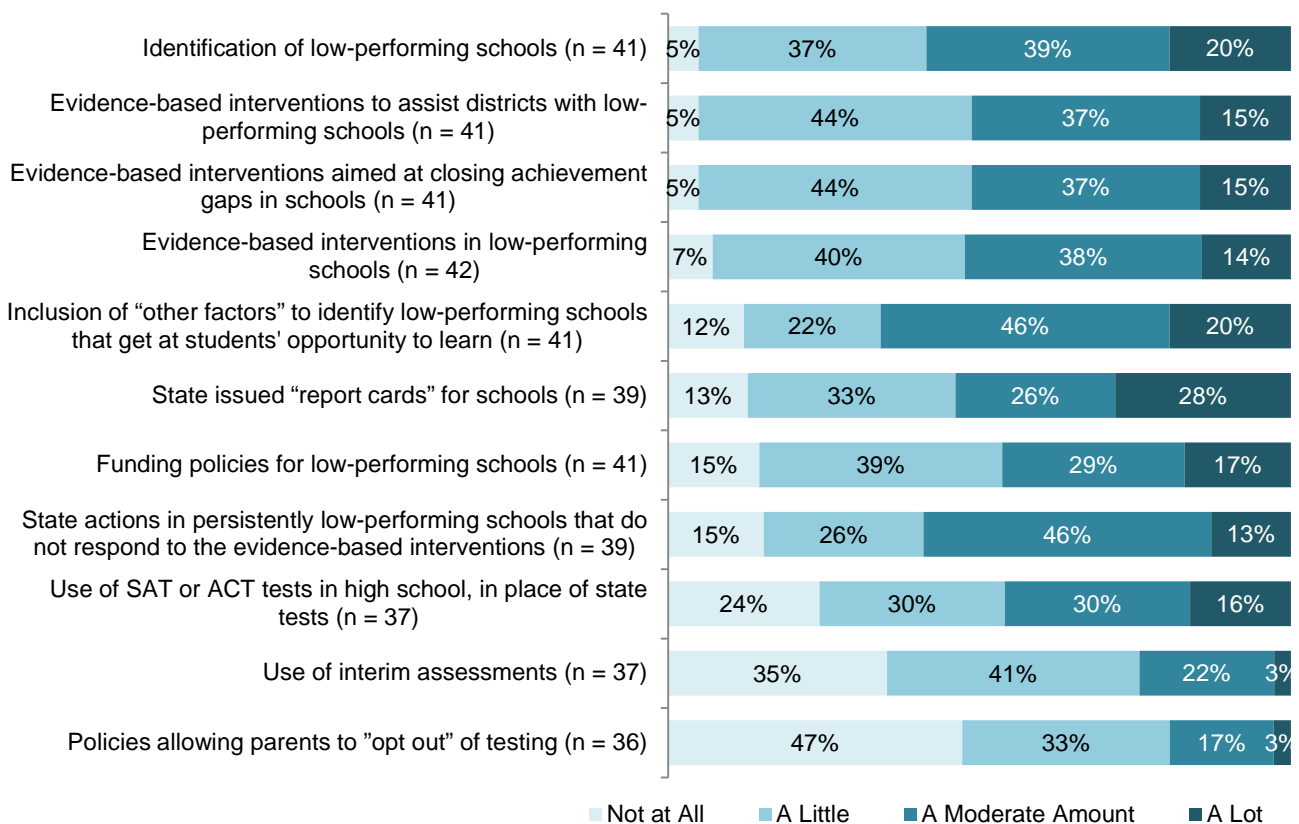
Furthermore, we used Chi square tests to explore how these reported changes vary based on past SEA policies. Analyses showed that SEA leaders’ survey responses were associated with past state policies for more intensive intervention in low-performing schools.

- SEA leaders in states that had policies that involved reforms in the day-to-day operations of schools were significantly more likely to report they were planning to change policies and practices at least “a moderate amount” ($\chi^2(1, N = 48) = 4.652, p = .031$)

However, the relationship between past policies for closing the schools was not significantly related to reports of at least moderate changes related to ESSA. We were not able to test other relationships because cell sizes were too small to warrant the statistical test.

RQ2: To examine state changes in more detail, the survey asked respondents to indicate the degree to which their SEA planned to make changes in specific school turnaround practices and policies related to ESSA. The CST identified these specific practices and policies based on a close reading of the ESSA legislation. Almost all SEA leaders (95%) reported their SEA was making at least “a little” change in the identification of low-performing schools under ESSA (Figure 2). Similarly, almost all reported plans for at least “a little” change to policies and practices for supporting evidence-based practices in districts and for closing achievement gaps. Notably, fewer SEA leaders said their state anticipated changing policies allowing parents to “opt out” of testing. It may be that many states already had adequate policies and practices in place prior to ESSA. Or it may be that SEA leaders anticipate that requirements for schools’ participation in testing would not change and, therefore, did not see a need to change “opt out” policies.

Figure 2
Percentages of SEAs Planning to Change Specific Policies or Practices Due to ESSA



Source: Evaluator analysis of Center on School Turnaround 2016 SEA survey data

An open-ended survey item asked SEA leaders what additional changes in policy and practice their states planned to make at least in part based on ESSA. In all, 25 SEA leaders responded to this item. Most frequently, SEA leaders explained that they were still waiting for guidance to finalize changes in policy and practice.

As other states are undoubtedly experiencing, we still lack clarity on many of the details of implementation. In particular, we would benefit from specific guidance on monitoring flexibilities (and efficient and effective monitoring best practices) within formula and competitive grants, as well as support in how best to proceed in creating ONE state plan rather than many program-specific plans. (SEA leader)

About a third of SEA leaders noted that their states were reviewing their current practices and policies in light of ESSA, while they awaited guidance. Several of these leaders, reported that they were already engaging stakeholders in these conversations.

We are currently evaluating our state accountability plan and will be moving forward to work with a stakeholder group to determine what will be included in our ESSA plan. (SEA leader)

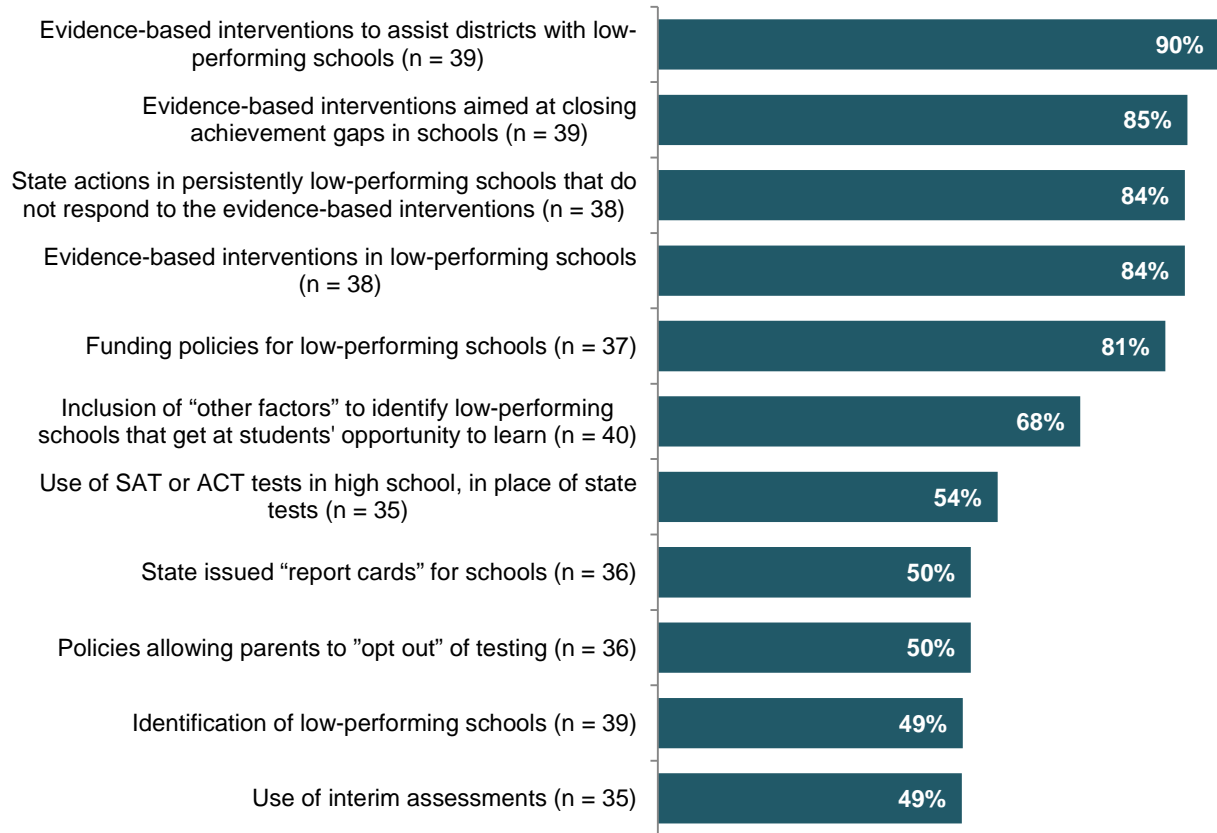
We are in the process of holding stakeholder meetings through advisory committees in our community to inform next steps. (SEA leader)

RQ3: Organizations like the CST and federal comprehensive centers are charged with helping SEAs implement practices and policies that turn around low-performing schools. To gather information about aspects of ESSA that SEA leaders will need help with, the survey asked these leaders the extent to which they agreed their state needs assistance with specific turnaround practices and policies related to ESSA.

Among the specific turnaround policies and practices this survey asked about, “supporting evidence-based interventions to assist districts with interventions for low-performing schools” stood out. The largest percentage of SEAs (90%) agreed their state will need help with this aspect of ESSA (Figure 3). More than 80 percent of SEAs also agreed their states need assistance with other aspects of ESSA that require evidence use. This includes evidence use to support districts in turning around low-performing schools, to close achievement gaps, and to work directly to turn around low-performing schools.

Figure 3

Percentages of SEAs “Agreeing” or “Strongly Agreeing” Their State Could Benefit From Assistance Supporting Turnaround Policies and Practices Related To ESSA



Source: Evaluator analysis of Center on School Turnaround 2016 SEA survey data

Smaller percentages of SEAs agreed their state needed assistance with other aspects of ESSA. While many SEAs reported their state was changing policies and practices for the “identification of low-performing schools,” only 49 percent reported they needed assistance with these efforts. It may be that states are revising their accountability systems in response to ESSA, but that they have plenty of staff expertise to make these revisions; or it may simply be too early for some SEA leaders to assess their needs in this area. Similarly, smaller percentages wanted assistance with revisions to report cards, parent “opt out” policies, or the use of interim assessments.

Significance

Survey results indicate that at the time of the survey (spring 2016) SEA leaders were already rethinking their states' policies and practices for turning around low-performing schools based on ESSA. Furthermore, states that had prior policies that related to reforms to the day-to-day

operation of the school were significantly more likely to report new plans for at least moderate changes based on ESSA. These results point to continued change in states' work to improve low performing schools, especially in states that have played a more active role in school reform.

Since the survey, the change in the presidency may have an impact on state plans. This impact may be felt in two ways. First, the Trump administration has further relaxed the reporting requirements for states around ESSA (Klein, 2017a). Second, this administration has signaled budget cuts for many federal and state education programs (Klein, 2017b;). The first change leaves even more to the discretion of states and the second may limit the resources states have to fully implement their planned changes.

Already in spring 2016, many SEA leaders said their states needed help with these changes related to ESSA. More freedoms coupled with lack of federal funding could increase these needs. Past research has also shown that states have low capacity for supporting school improvement efforts (Editorial Projects in Education 2006; Le Floch, Boyle, & Therriault, 2008; Minnici & Hill, 2007; Scott, 2008). This study shows that implementing changes related to low-performing schools under ESSA remains challenging for many states and reports from Washington suggest that implementation may become even more challenging. Simply put, SEAs cannot do all of this important work alone.

Therefore, SEA leaders should actively request assistance from the Regional Educational Laboratories and the Comprehensive Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education, and these entities should proactively provide guidance and technical assistance for state and local education agencies beyond those that specifically request support. ESSA already provides some guidance, specifying that the Regional Educational Laboratories provide technical assistance upon request to any state or local agency needing assistance with evidence-based requirements (ESSA, 2015). This support might begin with convening conversations, disseminating resources, and forming professional learning networks.

While SEAs work toward implementing ESSA, researchers need to continue to gather information about states' plans and actions. This work includes continuing to document state policies and practices and to survey SEA leaders about challenges. Reporting this information to policy makers at all levels may help ensure that ESSA guidance and funding supports positive implementation in states and, therefore, supports school improvement.

ESSA has the potential to have a strong impact on many aspects of state policy and practice for low-performing schools. Supporting organizations can work with SEAs to ensure that this impact is positive, and research organizations can continue to assist by identifying areas of SEA need and by tracking implementation progress.

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