

CAPITALIZING ON ESSA FLEXIBILITY: HOW STATES AND DISTRICTS CAN IMPROVE SCHOOLS AND ACHIEVE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY BY BOOSTING EDUCATOR EFFECTIVENESS



PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy brief is two fold. First, we aim to communicate a vision for school improvement that utilizes evidence-driven strategies focused on educator development and school and teacher leadership. Second, we seek to inform readers of the basic elements of ESSA, changes made to the federal k12 education law since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, and approaches detailed in state ESSA plans submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. Specifically, we will highlight federal funding streams and policy flexibility available through ESSA to achieve more equitable outcomes for students.

INTRODUCTION

Our students can't wait. That's the moral imperative that drives the work of educators, school leaders, policymakers, and educational organizations deeply committed to providing an equitable education to all students. School improvement funding and regulations have put this commitment into action, defining how schools, districts, and states can raise achievement for all students. Increasing academic achievement and closing the achievement gap were the key goals of this legislation, and continue to be the goals of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Yet, today, over a decade and a half since passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, we've seen little improvement in students' overall academic proficiency, and little traction in closing the achievement gap.

Why is sustained school improvement and educational equity so difficult to achieve? After analyzing NCLB and comparing it to the flexibility outlined in ESSA, we've concluded:

- 1 School improvement strategies must be evidence-based and proven to have an impact on student learning.**
- 2 Educator effectiveness strategies that engage and cultivate teacher leaders should be foundational to a comprehensive approach to school improvement.**
- 3 A punitive school improvement model, such as those mandated by NCLB, does not foster a school culture or climate in which educators and students can thrive.**

Our shared quest for educational equity demands that we embrace a different approach to school improvement. ESSA provides this opportunity—if not an explicit policy mandate—for schools, districts, and states to work differently than they have in the past. A combination of statutory, regulatory and funding flexibility, accompanied with requirements about “evidence-based” practices, can help educators to succeed and students to thrive.

OVERVIEW

The Struggles and Demands of School Improvement and Educational Equity

Educational equity demands a different approach to school improvement. Research shows that teachers and principals are the most important school-based factors that impact student achievement.¹ It also suggests that students are more likely to succeed when schools exhibit “collective leadership” and educators are at the center of school improvement strategies.² Unless we place educator empowerment and instructional improvement at the core of school improvement, our efforts to lessen educational inequities will continue to fall short.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) demonstrates that American schools have minimally improved student achievement over time.³ More than half of those gains occurred during the 1970s and 1980s,⁴ after passage of earlier iterations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and

¹ U.S. Department of Education, “Teachers and Leaders: America’s Engineers of Learning and Growth.”

² Leithwood, K., Seashore, K., Anderson, S., Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *Review of Research: How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota. Ingersoll, R., Siridines, P., Dougherty, P. (October 2017). *School Leadership, Teachers’ Roles in School Decisionmaking, and Student Achievement*. University of Pennsylvania, Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

³ Petrilli, M.J. and Munyan-Penney, N., (March 16, 2018), “NAEP Gains Over the Past 25 Years: A Closer Look at the Trends,” *Education Next*.

⁴ Tucker, M. (April 12, 2018). “NAEP: Do the Data Show That ‘Education Reform’ Has Worked—Or That It Hasn’t?” *Education Week*, Top Performers blog (at http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top_performers).

well before the NCLB era. The lack of recent progress is starkly highlighted by a widening achievement gap between high- and low-performing students, as shown by the latest 2017 NAEP results.⁵ Closing this gap and actually promoting educational equity has been a constant struggle. Students of color and students from low-income families disproportionately attend low-performing schools with high levels of educator turnover, perpetuating the cycle of inequity.

Signed into law in 2002, NCLB ramped up educational accountability for Title I schools that failed to meet student proficiency targets in mathematics and reading. Through School Improvement Grants (SIG), some instructional and capacity-building strategies

were required by law for low-performing schools,⁶ but NCLB did not require such initiatives to include an evidentiary base as is commonplace in many sections of the new ESSA law. However, NCLB required chronically low-performing schools that repeatedly failed to meet achievement targets to enter “corrective action” and take one of four prescribed steps: (1) replace the entire school staff, (2) contract the school out to private management, (3) be taken over by the state or district, or (4) reopen as a charter school. In 2009, the economic stimulus law (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act)—invested \$3 billion in the program and made it more prescriptive than it even had been under NCLB.⁷

CHANGES IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)	No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)
Assessment	
Annual testing required in mathematics and English language arts in grades 3–8 and once in high school. Science assessments required at least once in grades 3–5, 6–8, and 10–12. States and districts receiving Title I-A funds must participate in the NAEP in grades 4 and 8.	
School Accountability Measures	
NCLB required all schools to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for k12 students in English language arts and mathematics, in high school graduation rates, and in at least one other academic indicator. AYP was based on the expectation that 100% of students were to be proficient in reading and math by the 2013–2014 school year. Student proficiency requirements applied not only to students on average, but also to subgroups, including economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, English-language learners, African-American students, Asian-American students, Caucasian students, Hispanic students, and Native American students.	State accountability systems under ESSA must incorporate both academic outcomes and students’ learning opportunities. States must choose at least one other factor focused on “school quality or student success” that addresses students’ opportunity to learn (e.g., teacher engagement, student engagement, access to advanced coursework, postsecondary readiness, or school climate). Each factor has to allow for “meaningful differentiation” among schools. Academic factors must carry a “much greater” weight than the non-academic factors.
School Improvement Funding	
NCLB required “a statewide system of intensive and sustained support and improvement” for districts and schools receiving Title I funds. It required states to set aside 4 percent of their Title I funds to pay for school improvement efforts. It also authorized School Improvement Grants (SIG)—subgrants to school districts to support school improvement efforts.	ESSA requires state education agencies to set aside 7 percent of their Title I funding for school improvement. This new set aside replaces both NCLB’s 4-percent Title I state set aside and the SIG program.

⁵ U.S. Department of Education, National Bureau of Educational Statistics (2018), *The Nation’s Report Card: 2017 NAEP Mathematics and Reading Assessments*.

⁶ These strategies included teaching school staff how to use data and student work samples to improve instruction, helping schools choose instructional strategies, and providing guidance on analyzing and revising a school’s total budget so that resources are used more effectively and in line with achievement objectives.

⁷ U.S. Government General Accountability Office (July 2011). *School Improvement Grants: Early Implementation Under Way, but Reforms Affected by Short Time Frames*. Carlson Le Floch, K. et. al. (April 2016). *Receiving School Improvement Grants: Final Report*. U.S. Department of Education: Washington, D.C.

Identifying Low-Performing Schools

NCLB identified schools as in **need of improvement** if they fell short of state performance targets for at least two consecutive years. Instructional and capacity-building strategies were required to be implemented, including teaching school staff how to use data and student work samples to improve instruction, helping schools choose instructional strategies, and providing guidance on analyzing and revising a school's total budget so that resources are used more effectively and in line with achievement objectives.

Low-performing schools that did not meet state targets after three years were identified for **“corrective action.”** NCLB included a list of allowable interventions, one of which had to be selected: additional professional development; a new curriculum; more instructional time; a new staff; reduced management authority for the principal; reorganized internal school operations; or the appointment of an outside advisor.

After failing to meet targets after two years in corrective action, schools had to be identified for **“restructuring.”** Required to take one of four prescribed steps:

1. replace the entire school staff;
2. contract the school out to private management;
3. be taken over by the state or district; or
4. reopen as a charter school.

States must still identify schools that are underperforming, but have greater flexibility in determining criteria, interventions, supports, and exit criteria. However, ESSA requires the use of “evidence-based” strategies to improve low-performing schools.

ESSA creates two broad categories of low-performing schools:

Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI):

States must identify Title I schools that fall in the bottom 5% of performers, all public high schools in which fewer than 67% of students graduate, and Title I schools in which any student subgroup, on its own, would be identified as following in the lowest-performing 5% and has not improved in a number of years. Districts must devise “evidence-based” plans to implement in those schools. If a school does not demonstrate progress for a period of years (no more than four), the state must apply more rigorous interventions.

Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI):

States are required to identify any public schools in which subgroups of students are “consistently underperforming.” Schools must create an “evidence-based” plan to implement, and districts must monitor their efforts. If the subgroup continues to struggle, the school may be identified as CSI.

Research has determined, at best, a decidedly mixed impact of such school improvement strategies over the past decade. A 2017 U.S. Department of Education study suggests that the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program did not yield hoped-for increases in student achievement, high-school graduation, or college enrollment.⁸ While some state-specific evaluations show positive impacts of specific school-improvement strategies,⁹ these mixed findings influenced federal policymakers' decision to move away from such a prescribed approach to school improvement under ESSA.

Shifting the focus of school improvement from “wiping the slate clean” and eliminating key school staff, to, instead, developing and supporting educators who can execute a shared, research-based vision to increase student achievement, better positions district and

school leaders to truly achieve educational equity for all their students. School improvement can increase student achievement and promote educational equity, but it is an all-encompassing effort. Each school and district's unique plan is meant to target areas for improvement—whether professional development, academic standards, or school leadership. Yet, when policymakers design improvement with a deficit mindset, as in the past, district and school leaders are forced to work harder and not always productively in this pursuit.

The future can and should look far different from the past. ESSA provides the flexibility to do things differently than under NCLB. It allows states, districts and schools to shift from a punitive or scripted approach to addressing low-performing schools to a more customizable, capacity-building approach. The

⁸ U.S. Department of Education (January 2017), *School Improvement Grants: Implementation and Effectiveness*.

⁹ https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/15-2687_SRG_Impact-Report_ed_FINAL.pdf and <http://www.nber.org/papers/w17990.pdf> and <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0162373718760218?journalCode=epaa>

law allows schools and districts to develop supportive and collaborative school cultures, to build the capacity of educators, to strengthen their instructional practice and cultural competencies, or to help school administrators deepen and broaden their leadership skills. Doing so can truly make a difference, turnaround low-performing schools, and help close the educational equity gap. In practice, states and districts have yet to fully implement new school-improvement strategies. But changes are coming, based upon state ESSA plans submitted to and being approved by the U.S. Department of Education.

LEVERAGING FEDERAL FLEXIBILITY & EMBRACING 'EVIDENCE-BASED' STRATEGIES

The FY 2018 omnibus spending bill included increased education funding to Titles I-A and IV-A and level-funded Title II-A.¹⁰ These overall increases further expand the new ESSA opportunities that states are currently in the process of designing and implementing.

Title I (Improving The Academic Achievement of Disadvantaged Students)

Title I represents the single largest federal K12 educational expenditure (\$15.8 billion in the FY2018 omnibus). It is the largest focus in state ESSA plans. Its chief purpose is to “*improve the academic achievement of disadvantaged students.*” This improvement is accomplished through a variety of strategies, including by “*significantly elevating the quality of instruction by providing staff in participating schools with substantial opportunities for professional development*” and “*providing greater decision making authority and flexibility to schools and teachers in exchange for greater responsibility for student performance.*”¹¹

ESSA, like NCLB, continues to require a focused school-improvement effort. There are three categories of schools that states must identify for improvement: Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI), Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI), and Additional Targeted Support and Improvement. CSI schools are generally identified on the basis of overall student performance, while the TSI schools are identified based on low-performing student subgroups.¹² State strategies to turnaround these schools will be much more customized than in years past and are not the authoritative, top-down models used under NCLB. Further, there is a pronounced focus on research-based evidence for school improvement.

Changes to Title I in the ESSA law allow states to use multiple measures (not solely test scores) to judge school success and allow federal school improvement dollars to be used on a broader range of strategies than under NCLB. Further, each state is able to customize its own ESSA plan, providing greater flexibility for school districts to focus more on supporting their educators on the pathway to promoting educational equity for students.

In its *Principles for Effective School Improvement Systems*, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) encourages state education agencies to “prioritize school improvement with a specific focus on equity.” It encourages districts and schools to employ “evidence-based improvement plans” and to focus on “ensuring the highest need schools have great leaders and teachers who have or develop the specific capacities needed to dramatically improve low-performing schools.”¹³

While some state ESSA plans explicitly include competitive funding grants under Title I that allow for educator effectiveness as a school improvement strategy, other state plans integrate school improvement and educator effectiveness strategies at various levels. But there is legitimate fear given the organizational structure of many state and local education agencies, that Title I school improvement and Title II educator development strategies could continue to operate in two distinct worlds. State and district leaders have an opportunity to break apart these silos that could stifle collaboration and innovation.

Title II-A (Supporting Effective Instruction)

Because ESSA allows flexibility at the state and district levels, each school improvement plan and use of funds may be very different. Nationally, most Title II funding historically has been used for two primary activities: professional development activities for educators and class-size reduction.¹⁴ But, quite often, the expenditure of these funds has neither been coordinated with school improvement planning and budgeting nor directed toward evidence-based approaches to developing and supporting educators.

CCSSO’s *Principles for Effective School Improvement Systems* specifically encourages state education agencies (SEA) to work with districts and schools

¹⁰ Ujifusa, A. (March 23, 2018). “President Trump Signs Spending Bill That Includes Billions More for Education.” *Education Week*, Politics K–12 blog (at <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12>).

¹¹ U.S. Department of Education, *Every Student Succeeds Act*.

¹² Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (November 2017), *State Systems of Identification and Support under ESSA: A Focus on Designing and Revising Systems of School Identification*.

¹³ CCSSO (June 2017), *Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems*.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Education (August 2016), *Findings From the 2015–2016 Survey on the Use of Funds Under Title II, Part A*.

to “support the development of systems of ongoing, embedded, individual, and collective professional learning to develop more effective teachers, especially in low-performing schools.” CCSSO also calls upon SEAs to review local Title II plans and develop teacher equity plans that promote the “strategic” and “evidence-based use of Title II funds...to prioritize and support school improvement.”¹⁵

*New Teacher Center believes that Title II funds should be directed toward evidence-based approaches to accelerating educator development, supporting both teachers and principals to meet the comprehensive learning needs of all students. An independent evaluation of our teacher induction model found that it results in greater student learning in both English language arts and mathematics.*¹⁶

Such changes are beginning to occur, with some state ESSA plans articulating how they aim to utilize these federal dollars differently. For example:

- The Illinois State Board of Education will determine “portions of Title I and Title II-A funds to develop the state formula for the allotment of funds to CSI and TGI schools.”
- Oregon’s ESSA plan references the recommendations from the Governor’s Council for Educator Advancement which include strategies to target Title II-A around school improvement. These strategies include expanding mentoring and induction for beginning educators and administrators. “Braiding Title II-A funds with funds in other programs will allow districts the flexibility to be more responsive,” the Oregon ESSA plan reads.

Title IV-A (Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants)

Title IV-A received a windfall in the FY2018 omnibus budget bill, \$1.1 billion—nearly three times as much as in FY 2017 (\$400 million). The statutory purpose of this new flexible block grant program under ESSA is “to improve students’ academic achievement by increasing the capacity of state educational agencies (SEAs), local educational agencies (LEAs), and local communities to provide all students with access to a well-rounded education; improve school conditions for student learning; and improve the use of technology

to improve the academic achievement and digital literacy of all students.” Additional priorities for Title IV-A as stated in the omnibus budget bill including expanding “school-based mental health services and supports; for bullying prevention; and for professional development for personnel in crisis management and school-based violence prevention strategies.”

*School districts can use Title IV funds to create optimal learning environments for students. The U.S. Department of Education’s Title IV guidance communicates that these funds can be directed toward supporting social-emotional learning activities, including interventions that build resilience, self-control, empathy, persistence, and other social and behavioral skills.*¹⁷

There also are opportunities to address the statutory requirements of Title IV by leveraging this funding to support educator development and school improvement strategies. While ESSA allows districts to transfer all of their Title IV-A money into Title II-A (which funds educator development),¹⁸ for instance, there also are opportunities to braid these funds, target them within the school improvement process (through Title I).

Formula Funding Flexibility

Federal education policies that allow for state-driven approaches to school improvement, coupled with increased federal funding, provide an opportunity for state and local educational leaders to ensure that students most in need receive equitable educational opportunities. ESSA provides school districts three types of funding flexibility to accomplish this: (1) transferring funds, (2) braiding or coordinating the use of funds, and (3) consolidating funds in a Title I-A schoolwide program.

- Transferring funds: The law allows for school districts to transfer some of their federal formula grant funds from one Title to another. However, districts may only transfer funds from Title II-A and Title IV-A—not from Title I-A. Once funds are transferred, they take on the identity of the Title to which they were transferred and must be spent under rules applicable to that Title.

¹⁵ CCSSO (June 2017), Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems.

¹⁶ Schmidt, R., Young, V., Cassidy, L., Wang, H., & Laguarda, K. (2017). *Impact of the New Teacher Center’s New Teacher Induction Model on Teachers and Students*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. New Teacher Center (2017).

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Education (October 2016), *Non-Regulatory Guidance Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants*.

¹⁸ The state of Hawaii chose to transfer all of its Title IV funding to Title II in the 2017–18 school year. Retrieved on 4/23/2018 from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2018/03/school_safety_title_IV_essa_block_grant.html.

- “Braiding” or coordinating the use of funds: Districts and schools can use multiple federal grants to support various parts of an initiative while maintaining the award-specific identity of the funds and meeting the purpose of each specific grant program.
- Consolidating funds: A school operating a Title I-A schoolwide program¹⁹ has the flexibility to consolidate (blend) funds from Title I-A with other federal funds as well as with state and local funds, providing a single, flexible pool of funds. This consolidation may provide the resources and flexibility to more effectively design and implement an improvement strategy for the given school.²⁰

There is a cohesive, driving focus in states to utilize their limited federal resources in ways which have proven success in student achievement. ESSA’s funding flexibility allows states to select a structure that works for them to support initiative that their school districts specifically need. These include efforts to better connect educator effectiveness and school improvement strategies. Some state ESSA plans, for example, braid federal (Titles I, II-A and IV) funding, with state and local dollars to assist those schools most in need.

The siloed organizational structures of certain state education agencies and school district central offices may limit the collaborative spirit that is reflected in certain state ESSA plans from becoming a reality.²¹ Historically, many state education agencies and school district administrative offices have organized themselves around focus areas in state and federal programs, with separate offices for educator development and school improvement, for instance. These programmatic silos have not always engendered interagency and intra-agency collaboration needed to tackle the most vexing educational challenges.

Some states, however, have begun to chip away at this organizational tendency.

- Ohio, for instance, is exploring the concept of building a comprehensive consolidated competitive grant application system that “*will align all with the priorities of the state’s ESSA plan and district improvement plans*.” In doing so, the state’s goal is to remove “*program silos*” and “*award funds in a more coordinated manner*.”

- New Mexico’s ESSA plan calls for a “*...consolidated grant application process for ESEA Title I-A, II-A, and III-A (English language learners) to minimize burden and ensure that LEAs are able to engage in a coordinated planning and funding process*.”

Regardless of how educational agencies are structured, there is a need for state and district leaders to overcome organizational resistance and lack of awareness that may prevent the alignment of funding streams and strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the flexibilities provided by ESSA and the mixed evidence with regard to past school improvement efforts, education leaders are now able to adopt alternative approaches to improving school performance. They should move toward a vision that scales up what works to improve schools, including enhancing the collective capacity of educators to engage in effective teaching and leading. In doing so, the goal must remain to continue to disaggregate performance data for all student groups and to provide a quality education to our most vulnerable students.

We must lead at all levels to drive school improvement and overcome deep-seeded educational inequities within our schools. There are opportunities for state, district and school leaders—as well as state and local policymakers—to think differently about our approaches to school improvement. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act and emerging research about what works in education provides the space and insights to revise school-improvement strategies, to break down bureaucratic and funding silos that prevent more integrated efforts, and to broaden our view of what constitutes a successful school.

1 District and school leaders should develop a comprehensive understanding of their own state’s ESSA plan and engage in ongoing dialogue with state leaders to inform any needed refinements to the state ESSA plan and local school improvement plans.

This type of aligned policy opportunity happens very seldom. ESSA has provided states and districts with new authority and flexibility to design their own educational accountability systems and school-

¹⁹ A recent AIR study found that the percentage of Title I schools opting to become schoolwide programs has risen from only 10 percent in 1994-95 to 77 percent in 2014-15. Retrieved on 4/23/2018 from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/inside-school-research/2018/04/doing_more_with_title_i_grants.html.

²⁰ State of New Jersey Department of Education (June 2017), *Unlocking Your Federal Funds: Making the Funds Received Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as Amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Work More Effectively for Students and Educators*.

²¹ Unger, C., Lane, B., Cutler, E., Lee, S., Whitney, J, Arruda, E., & Silva, M. (2008). How can state education agencies support district improvement: A conversation amongst educational leaders, researchers, and policy actors. Providence, RI: The Education Alliance at Brown University.

improvement strategies. Through ESSA, states are the recipients of federal funding to meet the demands of the law. Their required state accountability plans define the alignment of resources from federal, state, and local funding streams to accomplish the task.

All parties should utilize this opportunity to help ensure every child has equitable access to a sound education. State and local education leaders should consider the need to amend or revise state ESSA plans over time. In fact, the federal law establishes a process to do exactly this.²² In the meantime, local education leaders should understand what options they have at their disposal through their state ESSA plans and consolidated federal grant applications to pursue school improvement differently than in the past.

2 State and district leaders must commit to breaking down the bureaucratic and funding silos that exist between Title I (school improvement), Title II (educator quality), and Title IV.

Mirroring separate titles of the federal education law, many state departments of education and school districts have separate offices or divisions that manage separate federal funding streams, and have done so for the past twenty years. Sometimes this professional “turf” prevents a collaborative effort to braid these funds toward a common purpose. State and district leaders now have an opportunity to breakdown these silos and craft funding strategies that address achievement gaps and school performance. Flexibilities in the ESSA law make such an approach both allowable and warranted in pursuit of better outcomes for every school and every student.

To create more aligned school improvement strategies, school districts should take full advantage of one of the three forms of funding flexibility under ESSA: (1) transferring funds, (2) braiding or coordinating the use of funds, and (3) consolidating funds in a Title I-A schoolwide program. In addition, they should leverage flexibilities within the law and within their state’s ESSA plan to move from NCLB-era structural school turnaround approaches toward strategies focused on developing the capacity of teachers and principals to work more effectively within schools in need. State and district leaders should insist that their bureau and division chiefs

engage in collaborative strategic planning to craft comprehensive school improvement plans that leverage and best utilize all available funding streams.

3 States and school districts should include evidence-based educator development strategies as a centerpiece of their school-improvement efforts and should engage and cultivate teacher leaders in school-improvement planning.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides the flexibility for states and districts to move away from NCLB-era approaches to school improvement and to make greater use of evidence-based solutions. In doing so, research evidence also suggests that students would benefit from teachers and school leaders taking mutual ownership of school improvement. While ESSA Title I does not require talent development strategies to be a component of school improvement, it allows for them to be among them. Given research evidence that teachers and principals are the most important in-school factors that impact student learning, efforts to improve schools necessarily should focus on developing and involving educators in this work.

ESSA flexibility, coupled with the inclusion of ‘evidence-based’ requirements throughout the law, provides an opening to end business-as-usual approaches to educator professional development. Redirecting the expenditure of \$2 billion in Title II-A funding toward evidence-based approaches to teacher induction, instructional coaching, and professional development holds promise to jump start lagging school performance. In addition, there are new opportunities to coordinate educator development strategies with Title I-funded school improvement efforts, which also must consist of evidence-based interventions. As an example, a federally funded, randomized controlled trial found that the New Teacher Center (NTC) induction model resulted in two-to-five additional months of student learning in both mathematics and English/language arts.²³ This type of intervention meets ESSA’s evidence requirements.

In 2017 Dr. Richard Ingersoll of the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education conducted an analysis based upon responses from nearly one million educators. His findings—summarized in NTC’s

²² Weiss, Joanne and McGuinn, Patrick. (2017). The Evolving Role of the State Education Agency in the Era of ESSA and Trump: Past, Present, and Uncertain Future. CPRE Working Paper #WP 2017–1. Philadelphia, PA: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

²³ Schmidt, R., Young, V., Cassidy, L., Wang, H., & Laguarda, K. (2017). *Impact of the New Teacher Center’s New Teacher Induction Model on Teachers and Students*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. New Teacher Center (2017). *New Teacher Center Teacher-Mentor Model Increases Student Achievement*. Santa Cruz, CA: New Teacher Center.

School Leadership Counts report—demonstrate that schools with more effective school and teacher leadership have higher student achievement in both mathematics and English/language arts.²⁴ School and teacher leadership elements most strongly correlated with student success are:

- fostering a shared vision for the school;
- holding teachers to high instructional standards;
- providing an effective school improvement team;
- involving teacher leaders in school improvement planning and the development of student conduct policies.

The importance of school leadership and teachers' roles in school decision-making is especially true for student achievement in high-poverty schools. Overall, faculty in high-poverty schools rated their school's instructional leadership lower than did faculty in low-poverty schools.²⁵ The analysis also reveals a wide range in the role of teacher leadership across different types of schools. Again, the most prominent differences occur between high- and low-poverty schools. The needs of low-performing schools also necessitate developing specific competencies for principals and teachers working within them, such as supporting the learning needs of specific student subgroups and leveraging data to inform decision-making.²⁶

There are positive examples of engaging educators in school improvement, but more effort is required. In 1990, Kentucky established school-based councils—comprised of school administrators, teachers, and parents—to create school policies and inform school improvement efforts.²⁷ Kentucky state law also requires the use of educator perception data to assist school leaders in improving persistently low-performing schools, and the state incorporates such teacher input in annual school and district improvement plans.²⁸ North Carolina requires the use of its Teacher Working Conditions Survey data in annual school and district improvement plans and as part of plans to assist persistently low-performing schools.²⁹

4 School districts should infuse a stronger focus on social-emotional learning and school climate into their school improvement strategies, including data collection and educator development.

As part of school improvement, we must strengthen the contexts in which teaching and learning takes place. Students learn best in environments where school leaders intentionally shape strong professional learning communities that support teacher growth and development. They learn best when teachers are effectively able to attend to diverse learner needs and building safe and inclusive classroom cultures.

Emerging research on the importance of optimal learning environments provides an opening to focus on students' social-emotional needs as well as their academic needs. "At the heart of what it takes for students to thrive are supportive, respectful, trusting relationships," write Dr. David Osher and Dr. Juliette Berg of the American Institutes for Research.³⁰ Overlapping social-emotional learning (SEL) components—engagement, safety, cultural competence, cultural responsiveness, challenge, and high expectations—support these relationships. Developing strong SEL skills helps students to "handle stress and show empathy" and "supports their academic achievement."³¹ School climate and SEL often are addressed separately by practitioners, but they truly are interrelated and dependent upon each other. School climate includes "the cultures, norms, practices, and organizational characteristics of schools, and how those factors impact student development."³²

Policy and practice increasingly reflect an awareness of the importance of SEL. The Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (SEAD) has highlighted the interconnected of students' social, emotional and academic development. A 2017 SEAD Commission report identified at least a dozen specific social and emotional skills that are clearly linked to school and life success and are relevant for both students and

²⁴ New Teacher Center (2017), *School Leadership Counts*.

²⁵ *School Leadership Counts*.

²⁶ Council of Chief State School Officers and EducationCounsel (April 2018). *Deep Dive into Principle #6 of the CCSSO Principles of Effective School Improvement Systems*. Washington, DC.

²⁷ Kentucky Department of Education, *School-Based Decision Making*.

²⁸ Kentucky Department of Education, *TELL Kentucky Survey*.

²⁹ North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey.

³⁰ Osher, D., & Berg, J. (2017). "School Climate and Social and Emotional Learning: The Integration of Two Approaches." Edna Bennet Pierce Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University.

³¹ Pennsylvania State University (January 2018), *School Climate and Social and Emotional Learning: The Integration of Two Approaches*.

³² Osher & Berg (2017).

the adults who teach and care for them. It grouped these skills into three interconnected domains:

- **Cognitive skills** including executive functions such as working memory, attention control and exibility, inhibition, and planning, as well as beliefs and attitudes that guide one’s sense of self and approaches to learning and growth;
- **Emotional competencies** that enable one to cope with frustration, recognize and manage emotions, and understand others’ emotions and perspectives; and
- **Social and interpersonal skills** that enable one to read social cues, navigate social situations, resolve interpersonal conflicts, cooperate with others and work effectively in a team, and demonstrate compassion and empathy toward others.³³

ESSA provides resources to address SEL in three distinct ways: (1) supporting schools with large populations of low-income students; (2) supporting teachers’ social-emotional health and training them to share these skills with their students; and (3) addressing school safety and student health.³⁴ As states implement ESSA, some are incorporating such SEL elements into their work, but none have incorporated SEL indicators into their school accountability systems.³⁵ This may not be a bad omission, as researchers have warned that such SEL indicators may not be ready for inclusion into high-stakes accountability systems.³⁶

The promise of richer SEL data is a promising step forward that may enable states and districts to move beyond a more narrow focus on academic test scores as a primary metric to measure improvements in schools and classrooms. The Learning Policy Institute suggests that states and districts consider three types of SEL indicators to inform school improvement: (1) measures of students’ social and emotional skills,

habits, and mindsets; (2) measures of school climate and supports for SEL; and (3) measures of student outcomes, such as chronic absenteeism and suspension rates, that are related to school climate and supports for SEL.³⁷

School leaders also must do a better job of training and supporting teachers to meet students’ SEL needs and helping principals to create school climates that support a SEL focus. Research has identified several teaching skills that are strong predictors of improvements in SEL outcomes for students. Teachers’ emotional support for students is related both to their own self-efficacy and happiness. Being responsive to the diverse learning needs of students requires teachers to be reflective, mindful, and present.³⁸ Further, teachers’ classroom organization predicts students’ reports of their classroom behavior.³⁹ This is a main reason why, for example, NTC’s **Teacher Induction Program Standards** include an emphasis on instructional mentoring to create optimal learning environments within schools and classrooms, to meet the variable learning needs of every student, and for diversity, equity and inclusion.⁴⁰

Positive school climates are not just important for students—they also are critical for educators. The presence of supportive conditions—such as trust and mutual respect—within a school enables teachers to accelerate their effectiveness over the course of their careers. The school principal is instrumental in establishing such supportive teaching and learning conditions within schools. A 2014 study by Dr. Matthew Kraft of Brown University determined that “teachers working in schools at the 75th percentile of professional environment ratings improved 38% more than teachers in schools at the 25th percentile after ten years.”⁴¹

³³ The Aspen Institute, (September 14, 2017), *The Evidence Base for How We Learn: Supporting Students’ Social, Emotional, and Academic Development*.

³⁴ The 74 (March 28, 2018), *3 Ways the Every Student Succeeds Act Supports Social Emotional Learning for Students and Teachers*.

³⁵ Learning Policy Institute, (April 18, 2017), *Encouraging Social and Emotional Learning in the Context of New Accountability*.

³⁶ Duckworth, A. and Yeager, D. (May 2015), “Measurement Matters: Assessing Personal Qualities Other Than Cognitive Ability for Educational Purposes,” *Educational Researcher*, 44(4): 237–251.

³⁷ Learning Policy Institute, (April 18, 2017).

³⁸ Hammond, Z., & Jackson, Y. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*.

³⁹ Blazar, D. and Kraft, M. (October 25, 2016). “Social And Emotional Skills In School: Pivoting From Accountability To Development,” *Shanker Blog*.

⁴⁰ New Teacher Center (2018), *Teacher Induction Program Standards*. NTC (2017), *Optimal Learning Environments*.

⁴¹ Kraft, M. and Papay, J. (December 1, 2014). “Can Professional Environments in Schools Promote Teacher Development? Explaining Heterogeneity in Returns to Teaching Experience,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.



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