Advancing Equity through ESSA: Strategies for State Leaders

ADDRESSING STUDENTS’ SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING NEEDS
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ADVANCING EQUITY THROUGH ESSA: STRATEGIES FOR STATE LEADERS

With the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states have a new opportunity to lead on educational equity. Public education is fundamentally a state responsibility that is explicitly addressed by each state’s constitution, and states provide the largest share of funding for public schools, which positions states to ensure equity in education remains a priority – and becomes a reality.

ESSA acknowledges this state responsibility and rebalances the federal role to allow greater state autonomy and flexibility in pursuing this equity mission, while keeping in place important guardrails. Achieving equity means that family income, race/ethnicity, English-language proficiency, and disability status no longer predict educational opportunities and outcomes. Achieving equity in public education will require addressing deep-seated inequities in funding, access to rigorous curriculum, and access to effective teachers and school leaders, among other factors.

Federal funding under ESSA can be a critical contributor to advancing the equity agenda. Whereas implementing prior federal policies has been characterized by bureaucratic oversight and a culture of compliance, ESSA offers a chance for states to be more creative and strategic in ensuring federal funding advances a state’s equity agenda – and not the other way around.

To help states use ESSA to close opportunity and achievement gaps, this document identifies eight equity priorities – closing funding gaps, improving low-performing schools, increasing access to effective teachers and leaders, supporting English learners, increasing access to advanced coursework, addressing disproportionate discipline practices, addressing students’ social-emotional learning needs, and improving access to high-quality instructional materials – and illustrates how states can use ESSA to improve equity in opportunities and outcomes.

HOW TO USE THIS FRAMEWORK

To take full advantage of the flexibility ESSA offers, state priorities and strategies need to guide ESSA planning. This framework treats eight issues that already are priorities in many states and identifies multiple ESSA provisions that could be purposed to address each issue; direct excerpts from the statute are included so State Education Agency (SEA) leaders know what the law requires and allows. Rather than considering each funding stream and planning requirement in ESSA as a discrete issue to address, this framework encourages states to think more holistically across titles and provisions to advance a comprehensive strategy. This framework does not attempt to catalog every opportunity to elevate and advance equity in ESSA, but highlights significant opportunities on which state leaders can focus their efforts.
For each equity priority, we describe multiple provisions in ESSA that state leaders can use to address opportunity gaps and improve achievement. The framework also identifies high-impact actions for state leaders and guiding questions to support conversations on how to make each strategy an effective lever for equity. Wherever possible, state leaders should use ESSA to strengthen and complement existing state or local equity initiatives – and to proactively address conflicts or mixed messages across programs. By assembling teams with diverse perspectives and responsibilities, state leaders can de-silo the planning and implementation processes and forge more coherence across strategies intended to advance equity.
ADDRESSING STUDENTS’ SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING NEEDS

What’s the Opportunity?

Learning science establishes that social-emotional development is integrally related to meeting rigorous academic goals and succeeding in school, work, and life. All students, and disadvantaged students in particular, need opportunities to develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Integrating a focus on students’ social-emotional learning needs in conjunction with academic instruction is critical, and ESSA provides multiple opportunities to authorize and fund programs that holistically address students’ social, emotional, and academic learning needs.

Leveraging ESSA

- **State Accountability Systems**: State accountability systems must include “not less than one indicator of school quality or student success” [Sec. 1111(c)(4)(B)(v)(I)] that may include measures of “student engagement” or “school climate and safety” [Sec. 1111(c)(4)(B)(v)(II)(III, VII)].

- **Public Reporting**: Each State Education Agency (SEA) and Local Education Agency (LEA) must submit information to the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) on “measures of school quality, climate, and safety, including rates of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, school-related arrests, referrals to law enforcement, chronic absenteeism (including both excused and unexcused absences), incidences of violence, including bullying and harassment” [Sec. 1111(h)(1)(C)(viii)(I)].

- **Title I, Part A Subgrants to LEAs**: Title I schoolwide schools (where at least 40 percent of students enrolled in the school or in the school attendance area come from low-income families and all students are considered to be “Title I students”) may design Title I programs, and therefore use Title I funds, to increase opportunities for all children to meet state standards, including programs and activities that provide a well-rounded education [Sec. 1114(b)(7)(A)(i)-(iii)]. Title I schoolwide programs can implement “counseling, school-based mental health programs, specialized instructional support services, mentoring services, and other strategies to improve students’ [non-academic skills]” [Sec. 1114(b)(7)(A)(iii)(I)]. Schoolwide schools may also implement schoolwide tiered models to prevent and address behavior problems, and early intervening services coordinated with similar activities under IDEA [Sec. 1114(b)(7)(A)(iii)(III)], and can also implement strategies to assist in the transition from preschool to elementary school [Sec. 1114(b)(7)(A)(iii)(V)].

  - Additionally, Title I targeted assistance schools may use Title I, Part A funds to provide Title I students a well-rounded education [Sec. 1115(b)(2)(A)], for certain transition programs [Sec. 1115(b)(2)(C)], for parent involvement strategies [Sec. 1115(b)(2)(E)], and for tiered models to prevent and address behavior problems and early intervention services coordinated with similar activities carried out under IDEA [Sec. 1115(b)(2)(B)(iii)].

  - Under NCLB, some states mistakenly believed that Title I funds could only be used for instructional interventions, and SEAs should ensure this misunderstanding does not carry over to ESSA. It is particularly important to ensure alignment between the new school quality indicator for accountability and SEA spending policies so that Title I funds can be used to support the state’s accountability decisions.
• **Funding for At-Risk Students:** Under Title I, Part D, Subpart 2, SEAs can apply for funds to support children and youth who are neglected, delinquent, or at-risk, including “providing targeted services for youth who have come in contact with both the child welfare system and juvenile justice system” [Sec. 1415(a)(2)(A)(iii)].

• **Title II, Part A Subgrants to LEAs:** LEA applications for Title II funds must include “a description of how the local educational agency will prioritize funds to schools served by the agency that are implementing comprehensive support and improvement activities and targeted support and improvement activities under section 1111(d) and have the highest percentage of children counted under section 1124(c)” [Sec. 2102(b)(2)(C)]. As part of this, LEAs may use Title II, Part A funds to develop programs and activities that increase the ability of teachers to effectively teach children with disabilities and English learners, which may include the use of multi-tier systems of support and positive behavioral supports [Sec. 2103(b)(3)(F)]. Title II, Part A local funds may also be used for in-service training for school personnel in “(i) the techniques and supports needed to help educators understand when and how to refer students affected by trauma, or students with or at risk of mental illness; (ii) the use of referral mechanisms that effectively link such children to treatment and intervention services […]; (iii) forming partnerships between school-based mental health programs and public or private mental health organizations; and (iv) addressing issues related to school conditions for student learning, such as safety, peer interaction, drug and alcohol abuse, and chronic absenteeism” [Sec. 2103(b)(3)(I)(i)-(iv)].

• **Title IV, Part A, Subpart 1 State Activities:** Using Title IV, Part A state set-asides, SEAs may support LEAs for a variety of activities, including those that “foster safe, healthy, supportive, and drug-free environments that support student academic achievement” or that support LEAs to implement school-based mental health interventions [Sec. 4104(b)(3)(B)(ii)(I)-(II)].

• **Title IV, Part A, Subpart 1 Subgrants to LEAs:** LEAs must use a portion of Title IV, Part A local funds for activities that support access to a well-rounded education, which may include “programs and activities that use music and the arts as tools to support student success through the promotion of constructive student engagement, problem solving, and conflict resolution” [Sec. 4107(a)(3)(B)], as well as “programs and activities that promote volunteerism and community involvement” [Sec. 4107(a)(3)(H)]. LEAs must also use a portion of this funding to support activities to support safe and healthy students, which may include school-based mental health services [Sec. 4108(5)(B)(ii)] or programs that provide mentoring and school counseling, [Sec. 4108(5)(C)(v)]. This funding can also support high-quality training for school personnel, including on “effective and trauma-informed practices in classroom management” and “crisis management and conflict resolution techniques” [Sec. 4108(5)(D)(ii)-(iii)]. SEAs should ensure LEAs are aware of these spending opportunities, and can work with LEAs to ensure their strategies are aligned and that the SEA is providing appropriate technical assistance and guidance on best practices.

• **21st Century Community Learning Centers:** Under Title IV, Part B, SEAs competitively award grants to LEAs, community organizations, non-profits, and other eligible entities to establish 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Funds can be used to establish or expand centers offering academic and supplemental services to students, family members, and community members [Sec 4204(a)(1)-(2)]. SEAs may reserve up to 5 percent of the allotment to fund state activities that may include providing training and technical assistance to subgrantees or conducting evaluations to examine the effectiveness of programs assisted under this section [Sec. 4202(c)(3)].

  o Under Title IV, Part F, Subpart 2 (Community Support for School Success), non-profits, Indian tribes, institutions of higher education, and other eligible entities (non-SEA) may apply for
competitive grants to establish promise neighborhoods and full-service community schools [Sec. 4621(1)-(2)]. Although SEAs do not apply for these funds directly, they could play a role in supporting local entities to effectively implement these programs and align them with other state initiatives to address the whole child.

- **Statewide Family Engagement Centers:** Title IV, Part E (Family Engagement in Education Program) authorizes the Secretary of Education to award grants to statewide organizations “to establish statewide family engagement centers that-- 1) carry out parent education, and family engagement in education, programs; or (2) provide comprehensive training and technical assistance to State educational agencies, local educational agencies, schools identified by State educational agencies and local educational agencies, organizations that support family-school partnerships, and other organizations that carry out such programs” [Sec. 4502(a)(1)-(2)]. Applications must describe how the SEA will support statewide family engagement centers [Sec. 4503(b)(2)].

- **Supporting Homeless Students:** SEAs must use funds under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to support the Office of the Coordinator for Education of Homeless Children and Youths [Sec. 9102(f)]. The Office of the Coordinator is responsible for a variety of activities, including coordinating with the SEA, social services agencies, and other relevant agencies to provide services for homeless children and youth and collaborating with educators, LEAs, and other entities to improve education and related services to homeless children and youth [Sec. 9102(f)(4)(A)-(E)]. SEAs should ensure that these services address the social-emotional learning needs of homeless children and youths as a part of this initiative.

- **Expanding Access to Preschool:** States may apply for Preschool Development Grants that includes a needs assessment on “the availability and quality of existing programs in the State, including such programs serving the most vulnerable or underserved populations and children in rural areas” [Sec. 9212(f)(1)(A)] and the development of “a strategic plan that recommends collaboration, coordination, and quality improvement activities (including activities to improve children’s transition from early childhood education programs into elementary schools) among existing programs in the State and local educational agencies” [Sec. 9212(f)(2)].
  - LEAs may also reserve Title I funds to support early childhood education programs for eligible children [Sec. 1113(c)(5)].

**High-Impact State Actions**

- Ensure state policies and practices permit and promote using federal formula funds, such as Title I, Part A and other ESSA funds, to support social-emotional learning. Policies and practices to examine include:
  - State guidance and rules for spending federal funds (formal and informal);
  - The state-designed application for ESSA formula funds that LEAs must submit to their state annually, which typically includes asks for plans and budgets;
  - The review and approval process (including rubrics) of these LEA applications;
  - Technical assistance activities;
  - Other state oversight activities, including monitoring.
• Develop activity-focused guidance describing strategies LEAs can implement to strengthen social-emotional learning in Title I schools and how ESSA and other federal funding sources can be used to help pay for those strategies.

• Evaluate the quality of school climate/culture indicators and how they can be used most appropriately to improve student learning, including social-emotional learning. Consider introducing new or additional measures that can provide other important indicators of student success that may inform school improvement strategies and help LEAs understand how this work supports students’ social-emotional learning.

• Ensure that state guidance on spending federal funds clarifies that federal funds can be used for social-emotional learning.

• Leverage public reporting on discipline, attendance, and bullying/harassment to elevate the need for attending to students’ social and emotional development.

• Ensure that LEAs are familiar with evidence-based social-emotional learning interventions that are eligible for funding under Section 1003 for School Improvement activities.

• Ensure alignment between the SEA’s and LEAs’ in-school and out-of-school initiatives to address students’ social, emotional, and academic learning needs.

• Direct funds to LEAs and schools with the greatest need and help them build capacity to design and implement social-emotional learning programs, including wraparound services and community schools.

• Coordinate with educator preparation programs and professional development providers to ensure that future teachers and leaders are trained in social-emotional learning competencies.

• Support LEAs implementing programs to improve students’ social-emotional learning by providing them with opportunities for networking, thought partnership, and technical assistance.

• Target slots for preschool programs to the most vulnerable students to help them develop school readiness skills and address achievement and opportunity gaps that begin before the start of formal schooling.

• Lead a public conversation on the importance of social-emotional learning and the evidence that it improves school climate/culture, student achievement, and positive life outcomes.

Guiding Questions for State Leaders

• What is the SEA capacity and level of expertise to provide guidance and support to districts on social-emotional learning? Where can we build or borrow capacity and expertise?

• Are SEA staff familiar with research establishing social-emotional learning as an effective way to improve school climate/culture and increase student achievement? Are there effective ways to disseminate this information to LEA and school leaders?

• What is the capacity of LEAs and school leadership to address social-emotional learning?

• How can we elevate social-emotional learning within state-developed instructional frameworks or other tools to gauge educator effectiveness?
• What is the evidence base on social-emotional learning? How can we connect districts and schools with evidence-based interventions and programs?

• What is the quality and effectiveness of current early childhood education and Pre-K programs? Where are there gaps in quality and access? How might our state target the expansion of early childhood education slots to leverage new funding?

• Do we have guidance, tools, or images on high-quality social-emotional learning that we can share with LEAs? Do we have the capacity to develop these resources? Can we partner with outside organizations to produce these tools?

• What other state agencies will we need to coordinate with to holistically support students’ social-emotional learning needs? What capacity do we need to create and sustain those partnerships, and where can other agencies lend capacity to deepen our work in this area?
