Advancing Equity through ESSA: Strategies for State Leaders

CLOSING FUNDING GAPS
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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.
CLOSING FUNDING GAPS

What’s the Opportunity?

One enduring inequity in education is the gap between funding levels for schools serving white, affluent students and those serving high proportions of low-income students and students of color. Equitable funding is critical to ensure that all schools and students have the opportunity to meet high standards. ESSA can shine a light on inequitable funding and target supports to the schools that need them the most.

Leveraging ESSA

- **Public Reporting:** State report cards must include “the per-pupil expenditures of Federal, State, and local funds, including actual personnel expenditures and actual nonpersonnel expenditures of Federal, State, and local funds, disaggregated by source of funds, for each local educational agency and each school in the State for the preceding fiscal year” [Sec. 1111(h)(1)(C)(x)].

- **School Improvement Resource Review:** Each school identified under the state accountability system for comprehensive support and improvement must “locally develop and implement a comprehensive support and improvement plan for the school to improve student outcomes,” which must “[identify] resource inequities, which may include a review of local educational agency and school-level budgeting, to be addressed through implementation of such comprehensive support and improvement plan” [Sec. 1111(d)(1)(B)(iv)].

  - Additionally, schools identified for targeted support and improvement “shall also identify resource inequities (which may include a review of local educational agency and school level budgeting), to be addressed through implementation of such plan” [Sec. 1111(d)(2)(C)] if the performance of any of the student groups in those schools would place them in the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools using the state’s methodology under Section 1111(c)(4)(D).

  - State Education Agencies (SEAs) must also “periodically review resource allocation to support school improvement” for each Local Education Agency (LEA) serving a significant number of schools identified for comprehensive support and improvement and a significant number of schools identified for targeted support and improvement [Sec. 1111(d)(3)(A)(ii)].

- **Fiscal Support Teams:** Under Title VIII, Part B, SEAs may now use consolidated state administrative funds for the “implementation of fiscal support teams that provide technical fiscal support assistance, which shall include evaluating fiscal, administrative, and staffing functions, and any other key operational function” [Sec. 8201(b)(2)(l)].

- **Weighted Student Funding Pilot:** ESSA authorizes a new pilot program for 50 Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to design a school funding system that targets additional funds to groups of students with the greatest need. Although this is a grant to LEAs, there is a role for SEAs to play in enabling the pilot and supporting participating LEAs. As part of LEAs’ applications for the pilot, they will need to describe their legal authority to use state and local funds for the weighted student funding system [Sec. 1501(d)(1)(A)(ii)] so SEAs will need to ensure LEAs have this ability. The pilot is scheduled to expand in the 2019-2020 school year [Sec. 1501(c)(3)], giving SEAs a role to surface best practices and provide technical assistance and resources for other participating districts in how they can best target funds to meet students’ needs.
High-Impact State Actions

- Ensure that new funding transparency requirements elevate equity by presenting information in a clear, user-friendly format. States should solicit feedback on the utility of state report cards and adjust their format over time to make the data understandable and actionable.

- Assist LEAs in developing the accounting and financial management infrastructure needed to gather the required per-pupil spending data. This could include highlighting LEA access to state accounting or financial management tools (if available), convening LEA workgroups, or bringing in outside experts to help LEAs implement accounting and financial management systems needed to generate the required data.

- Assist LEAs with organizing and presenting financial data effectively; consider developing a template that makes data accessible to general audiences.

- Identify and honor LEAs achieving greater funding equity for schools serving high proportions of students of color and students from low-income families. Highlight their policies and practices so they can be adapted by other LEAs.

- Work with districts to connect public reporting on per-pupil expenditures with districts’ resource reviews for schools identified for comprehensive support and improvement and targeted support improvement. Ensure these resource reviews are taken seriously and that LEAs address resource inequities as a condition of receiving school improvement funds.

- Design LEA-to-SEA grant applications for funding sources that do not flow by formula, such as Section 1003 School Improvement funds or Section 1003A Direct Student Services funds (if the SEA decides to implement that option) in ways that target schools with the most pressing funding gaps and the clearest plans for using grant funding to address resource inequities. Where districts with the greatest need do not have a plan or adequate capacity to target supplemental funding, states should provide support to develop a plan or connect those districts with technical assistance providers to help them address these gaps and identify the underlying causes behind inequitable funding, opportunities, and outcomes.

Guiding Questions for State Leaders

- What is the current quality and reliability of the financial data? What assistance do LEAs need to create accurate, useful data? Were there quality-assurance issues with school finance data produced under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 that can be addressed before ESSA reporting is required?

- What data do we need to inform decisions about funding? How can data on school-level expenditures be used to advocate for greater funding equity?

- Using these data, are we able to identify funding gaps between districts in our state, or between schools within our districts?

- How might our state prioritize or target funding to close gaps? Which students, schools, districts, and issue areas need the most attention? What state programs can augment ESSA’s focus to accelerate funding equity?
• What community partners or providers can extend the reach of targeted funds and lend capacity to LEAs and schools?

• How will our state ensure that new approaches to school funding do not result in unintended inequities for other student groups?

• How will we effectively communicate an equitable funding strategy to the public and engage stakeholders in this process?