

National Association of State Boards of Education

## ➔ Seven Questions Boards Should Ask about Their ESSA State Plans

By Kris Amundson

Returning more responsibility to states for making education policy was the central premise (and promise) of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In fact, the *Wall Street Journal* called ESSA “the biggest devolution of federal control to the states in a quarter century.”<sup>1</sup> Shortly after the bill passed in December 2015, states set to work on plans for using ESSA to shape policy in their states. Their assumption was that the federal government would provide some regulatory “guardrails” to guide that work.

With the recent congressional decision to rescind the accountability regulations for ESSA by invoking the Congressional Review Act (CRA), states find themselves with even more authority. How will they approach the challenges and opportunities ESSA provides? Will they ensure equity and excellence for all students?

We will find out soon. In April or September, states will file comprehensive plans for how they plan to spend federal funding.<sup>2</sup> Each state is different, and each state plan will be developed within the context of its own political and educational landscape. Since some state plans are already available online, it is possible to see how the early birds are approaching equity and excellence.

State education agencies (SEAs) have the primary responsibility for developing and filing the state plan. But state boards of education play a key role. In many states, the board has specific statutory responsibility for carrying out some elements of the plan. For example, a recent NASBE publication reported that in 31 states, state boards have

primary authority over the state summative assessment.<sup>3</sup> In addition, 45 state boards adopt the learning standards on which the assessment should be aligned.

In addition, state boards are highlighted in ESSA as one of the groups that must be provided “meaningful” consultation. And because state boards serve as the citizen voice in education, they should also ensure that the state plan reflects input gained from stakeholders during the planning process.

In most states, the board will take a formal vote to approve the plan before it is sent on to the U.S. Department of Education (ED). Here are seven big questions board members should have answered before they vote.

### 1. WHAT ARE OUR GOALS FOR IMPROVING K-12 STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND OUTCOMES?

Under the accountability regulations that were invalidated by the CRA, the Education Department noted: “The final regulations give states flexibility to *create their own educational visions and incorporate new measures of school quality or student success into their accountability systems* while maintaining the core expectation that states, districts, and schools work to improve academic outcomes for all students, including individual subgroups of students.”<sup>4</sup> (emphasis added)

That emphasis on creating a unique state vision should still permeate the state plan—even without these regulations. And an effective state plan must begin with clear goals. As Lewis Carroll said, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any path will take you there.”

State boards should ensure that their state

plan is built around ambitious goals and also ask for information about how those goals (and the timeline for achieving them) were developed. For states without a strategic plan, stakeholder input can help identify these overarching goals.

A focus on the goals will help boards and SEAs make tough choices on where to prioritize federal funding. For example, if the state wants to prioritize closing the achievement gap in third grade reading proficiency, then helping teachers strengthen their ability to teach literacy skills should be a focus of the state’s professional learning.

The District of Columbia’s plan, for example, sets a long-term goal that 85 percent of students will be proficient in reading. The plan further spells out that the goal applies to all students. Clearly, the need to close the achievement gap will need to drive many other decisions.

States that want to focus on providing all students with a well-rounded education could include inputs as part of their school accountability system. As part of its ESSA plan, Louisiana will begin the development of an “Interests and Opportunities” indicator, designed to promote a well-rounded education. The indicator will measure, for example, the extent to which elementary and middle schools are exposing students to high-quality arts and foreign language experiences. At the high school level, it will measure and evaluate schools’ efforts to expand access to advanced courses in both applied and academic fields. In all schools, the index aspires to measure not only the expansion of such experiences for students but also the extent to which students of all backgrounds experience the offerings fairly.

Here are some questions state boards should ask about the state plan’s goals:

- Has our state gone through a formal goal-setting process?
- If not, how did the state develop the

## **BOX 1: LOUISIANA PLANS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF FLEXIBILITY**

In Louisiana, one goal of the state plan is to narrow achievement gaps between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. Accordingly, their plan specifies that districts should use funding from a variety of federal sources. School systems in Louisiana will thus include Title I, Title II, and Title III investments such as the following in their annual plans to address the challenges of historically disadvantaged students:

- high-quality, early screening and continued monitoring until the student is exited effectively from additional support services such as academic interventions, special education, or English language services;
- interventions and instructional practices that help students access grade-level learning along with their peers rather than maintaining a below-level learning gap; and
- school structures for learning that are the least disruptive and best integrated for a student's needs.

goals on which the current state plan is based?

- Does our state ESSA plan support those goals? How/how not?

## **2. HOW WILL OUR PLAN PROTECT EQUITY?**

Congress's action under the CRA not only eliminates the key equity protections that were included in the ESSA accountability regulations, it prevents ED from ever creating regulations that are "substantially the same"—unless Congress subsequently gives it the power to do so.

So it is up to states. They must guarantee that their state plans continue to look at promising practices such as a focus on growth rather than proficiency or inclusion of metrics that incorporate civic or career readiness in addition to summative tests. Yet will SEAs, conditioned by years of the compliance-based accountability created under No Child Left Behind, be willing to innovate? Clearly, state boards need to keep asking questions that encourage innovative approaches.

States also need to call out their commitment to equity. In Ohio, which has adopted a "third grade reading guarantee," the state plan notes: "Reading is the foundation for all learning. We must identify and address reading issues as early as possible." The K-3 Literacy component looks at how successful a school is at getting struggling readers on track to proficiency in third grade and beyond.

Here are some questions state board members should ask to ensure that the state plan focuses on equity:

- How does this plan help us improve performance for students of color, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families?
- Does the state plan ensure both equity and excellence? Or does it achieve equity by defining proficiency down?
- How does the state plan communicate the importance of equity to all stakeholders?

## **3. HOW DOES OUR PLAN PROMOTE FLEXIBILITY IN ALLOCATING FEDERAL FUNDING?**

State plans cover a wide range of federal programs. For years, states have asked for greater flexibility to allocate federal funds to address their greatest needs. ESSA offers some opportunities to move away from rigid federal requirements, but there will need to be changes on the state level to make that possible.

The plans must spell out how the state expects to allocate resources from each of the federal programs for which it will receive funds, including the following:

- Title I, Part A (financial assistance to local education agencies and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards);
- Title I, Part C (high-quality and comprehensive educational programs for migratory children);
- Title I, Part D (educational services for neglected or delinquent children and youth in local and state institutions);
- Title II, Part A (the Teacher and Principal Training and Recruitment Fund);

- Title III, Part A (helps institutions of higher education support low-income students);
- Title IV, Part A (supports Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants);
- Title IV, Part B (supports educational activities in community learning centers);
- Title V, Part B, Subpart 2 (supports charter schools);
- The McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act (supports educational programs for homeless students).

The consolidated state plan is one way to coordinate and comprehensively plan for the use of federal funds that provide critical support to schools and districts. Board members should ask whether and how their state plans to take advantage of this flexibility and what regulatory changes or internal SEA adjustments will be necessary (for one example from Louisiana, see box).

There is another way to increase flexibility of federal funding to focus on the neediest children: schoolwide Title I programs, which allow Title I funds to support reforms that benefit every student in a school that enrolls low-income students. Schoolwide programs also allow for Title I funds to be combined with other federal and state funding streams, which can focus a number of smaller funding streams into a larger and higher-impact investment opportunity. Schoolwide programs can also reduce administrative overhead.

Here are some questions state board members should ask:

- Does our state have a vision for all students that drives state spending decisions?
- Does this plan set out a comprehensive approach to meeting student needs, or does it keep funding strictly segregated by category?
- How will the SEA help local districts build their capacity for more flexible uses of federal funding?
- Has our state considered moving to schoolwide Title I funding? What policy changes would the state need to make?
- Will any state policies need to be changed to permit greater flexibility?
- How will the SEA work with ED to implement the desired flexibility?

#### 4. HOW DOES OUR STATE PLAN IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF TEACHERS AND EDUCATION LEADERS?

Research has consistently shown that teachers are the single most important in-school factor affecting student achievement. More recently, researchers have established clear links between school leadership and student achievement.<sup>5</sup> State boards that want to focus on equity must pay attention to the quality of teachers and leaders in their schools.

State boards have a significant role to play. In 33 states, the board has full control over teacher licensure, and in two additional states, that responsibility is shared. In Massachusetts, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) included teacher quality in its strategic plan. In 2012, BESE changed the program approval standards for teacher preparation programs across the state. These new standards ensure that teachers entering Massachusetts classrooms will be prepared to be effective on day one.

In addition, most boards control the licensure for principals and other administrators. In 36 states, boards have full or partial authority for principal/administrator licensure or the standards for their preparation and certification programs.

Boards also have responsibility for ensuring that students living in poverty, English learners, and minority students are not disproportionately served by teachers who are inexperienced, teaching out of their field, or ineffective. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act requires states to report out on the distribution of these teachers, and states should ensure that their plan makes some provision for keeping track of the quality of educators who teach the neediest students.<sup>6</sup>

NASBE's State Board Insight database tracks the frequency with which state boards discuss issues of teacher supply and teacher quality. The subjects appear frequently on state board agendas. Most recently, for example, the New York Board of Regents addressed licensure issues within the context of teacher shortages.

To focus on teacher and leader quality, here are questions boards should ask:

- How is our state plan designed to attract,

prepare, develop, and retain effective teachers and leaders? How do the proposed activities help develop teachers and leaders who can support and strengthen the performance of all students in the state?

- How does the plan address the need to recruit and retain teachers and leaders in high-needs areas, including special education, STEM, and other shortage areas?
- How does the plan help principals develop the leadership skills they need to support the development of effective teachers?

#### 5. DOES OUR ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM MEASURE WHAT WE WANT STUDENTS TO KNOW?

One of the criticisms of NCLB-era accountability was that too many state summative assessments focused on relatively low-level thinking tasks. Other critics pointed out that too often state assessments did not measure the things that state policymakers thought were most important.

ESSA gives states the opportunity to change that. By relying on multiple measures of achievement, states can focus on issues they care about, including social and emotional learning or career readiness.

For example, the Massachusetts state plan explicitly highlights the commitment to higher order thinking: "The state will upgrade the MCAS to better measure the critical thinking skills students need for success in the 21st century."

The state accountability system may include student growth or proficiency/mastery. For states that want to highlight continuous improvement, a growth measure (measuring students across two or more points in time) would make sense. For those states that focus on ensuring all students meet at least a basic level of understanding, a proficiency/mastery metric (measuring students at a single point in time) might be better aligned with that goal.

To ensure that the state accountability system measures the things the board wants students to know, here are some questions board members should ask:

- Please share the components of our state assessment. How much time do students spend writing versus answering multiple choice questions, for example?

- How does our state assessment measure student knowledge beyond memorization?
- How do the components of our accountability system fit together to measure the goals we have adopted?

#### 6. HOW WILL OUR STATE EVALUATE AND SUPPORT LOCAL PLANS FOR LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS?

Persistently underperforming schools have been a continuing challenge in education. Over the years, the federal government has tried many approaches to address this problem. Most recently, the Obama administration authorized \$7 billion in School Improvement Grants (SIG) between 2010 and 2015.

Schools receiving SIG funds needed to adopt one of a limited number of turnaround models. Initially, there were four preferred approaches: replacing the principal and at least half the teachers, converting into a charter school, closing altogether, or undergoing a "transformation," including hiring a new principal and adopting new instructional strategies, new teacher evaluations, and a longer school day.

Eventually, the program allowed more flexibility, but it remained prescriptive. The federal government's own analysis of the SIG program revealed a major problem: None of the approaches worked very well.<sup>7</sup> The report concluded: "We found that the implementation of SIG-funded models had no significant impact on math or reading test scores, high school graduation, or college enrollment for schools near the SIG eligibility cutoff. In addition, there were no significant impacts within student and school subgroups. For elementary grades, we found no evidence suggesting that one model was more effective at improving student achievement than another."

With ESSA, the pendulum swung in the other direction. The law now gives primary responsibility to local districts for designing a plan to support low-performing schools. The state's role is more supportive, ensuring that local districts adopt "evidence-based" interventions and checking in on progress.

ESSA authorizes two new programs that can be focused on lower-performing schools and districts: Direct Student Services and Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants. The two programs

offer the flexibility to tailor investments based on the needs of their unique student populations, particularly students attending schools where enriching experiences and challenging coursework are rare.

Here are some questions state board members should ask about local improvement programs:

- Has our state identified a vision for a system to support school improvement statewide?
- What has our state done previously? What has worked? What has not?
- What lessons can we learn from our successes and failures?
- Is our state's turnaround vision a part of our strategy for developing teachers and school leaders? How can state policies develop and support educators working in schools with the highest need?

## 7. IS STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT EMBEDDED IN THE PLAN AND SEEN AS AN ONGOING ACTIVITY?

ESSA calls for “meaningful consultation” with a wide variety of stakeholder groups. States have worked hard to engage with stakeholders. They have held meetings across the state, used online communications, and pulled together stakeholder work groups.<sup>8</sup>

A recent NASBE report found that in the summer of 2016 no state felt “confident they were doing everything right on stakeholder engagement.”<sup>9</sup> Most states are recognizing that stakeholder engagement is not a one-time activity but rather a long-term initiative.

Stakeholders—especially parents—are force multipliers. They can provide critical support for boards that want to make progress. But some policies may need to be changed. For example, boards may need to revisit how to manage public testimony at board meetings or how to use technology in ways that do not violate the state's open meeting laws.

Some boards have already ensured that stakeholder engagement is part and parcel of their work. Engagement is baked into

the mission of the Illinois State Board of Education: “Provide leadership and resources to achieve excellence across all Illinois districts through engaging legislators, school administrators, teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders in formulating and advocating for policies that enhance education, empower districts, and ensure equitable outcomes for all students.”

Massachusetts is planning to sustain meaningful engagement even after their plan is filed. The state plan particularly focuses on representing historically underserved students. As the plan notes, “[S]takeholder voice and analysis of the strong work under way in Massachusetts districts and schools will continue to play a prominent role. . . . We will . . . offer additional opportunities for stakeholders to provide input, particularly at key junctures when we are considering significant changes to an element of the plan.”

Here are questions that should be asked about the state plan to make stakeholder engagement a central part of the board's work:

- What is the state's vision for engaging stakeholders?
- What worked in the state's outreach to stakeholders for development of the state plan? What did not? What lessons can be learned?
- What state policies need to be changed to promote greater citizen engagement?

The first state plans submitted under ESSA will shape education policy in the state for many years. Boards can and should play a critical role in developing them. These questions will ensure that state boards stay at the table throughout the process.

*Kris Amundson is president/CEO of NASBE. Many education policy leaders suggested key questions boards should be asking about state plans: Special thanks to Chad Aldeman, Sandra Boyd, Michelle Exstrom, Carissa Moffat Miller, Chris Minnich, and Stephanie Wood-Garnett for their insights. Thanks to Abigail Potts and Sarah-Jane Lorenzo for research assistance in preparing this paper.*

## NOTES

1. “No Child Left Behind's Successor: Congress Rewrites the Bush-Era Law by Giving More Power to States,” Review & Outlook, *Wall Street Journal* (November 29, 2015).
2. A state may notify ED of its intent to submit its plan to the governor by April 3, 2017, and subsequently submit the plan to ED no later than the end of the 30-day review period or May 3, 2017, whichever is earlier.
3. Kris Amundson and Gene Wilhoit, “Take It Off the Consent Agenda: Nine Questions State Boards of Education Should Ask about State Assessment Systems,” *Policy Update* 23, no. 11 (Alexandria, VA: NASBE, April 2016).
4. U.S. Department of Education, “Accountability, State Plans, and Data Reporting: Summary of Final Regulations,” (Washington, DC: ED, November 28, 2016), <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essafactsheet1127.pdf>.
5. Karen Seashore Louis et al., “Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning,” Final Report of Research to The Wallace Foundation (University of Minnesota and University of Toronto, 2010).
6. Elementary and Secondary Education Act § 1111(h)(1)(C)(ix).
7. Lisa Dragoset et al., “School Improvement Grants: Implementation and Effectiveness (NCEE 2017- 4013),” (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2017).
8. Kansas Department of Education, “Kansas Can,” website, <http://www.ksde.org/Agency/Fiscal-and-Administrative-Services/Communications-and-Recognition-Programs/Vision-Kansans-Can>; State of Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, “Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA),” website, <http://www.k12.wa.us/ESEA/ESSA/>; Colorado Department of Education, “ESSA in Colorado,” website, <https://www.cde.state.co.us/fedprograms/essa>.
9. Rachel Man and Chris Hofmann, “ESSA Stakeholder Engagement: Early Challenges and Promising Practices,” *Policy Update* 24, no. 1 (January 2017).