

ESSA and Accountability Frequently Asked Questions

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reduces the federal role in education accountability decisions by eliminating many prescriptive requirements set forth by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and allowing states greater leeway in designing their own accountability systems. ESSA requires that states establish student performance goals, hold schools accountable for student achievement, and include a broader measure of student performance in their accountability systems beyond test scores. It also eliminates NCLB's specific list of corrective actions and required school improvement strategies. In its place, ESSA allows districts to design and implement their own turnaround plans for low-performing schools. See below for answers to the most essential accountability questions.

1. What happened to “adequate yearly progress” (AYP)?

ESSA eliminates AYP and NCLB's 100 percent proficiency goals and instead allows states to establish their own goals and milestones and hold schools accountable based on the criteria listed in the item below.

2. What are the new criteria by which schools will be measured?

For elementary and middle schools:

- Results on state standardized tests in reading, math, and science
- English language learner proficiency
- One other academic measure
- At least one nonacademic measure*

For high schools:

- Results on state standardized tests in reading, math, and science
- English language learner proficiency
- Graduation rates
- At least one nonacademic measure*

*These measures may differ among grade spans, but must be the same for all high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools in the state. For example, a state may require all high schools to track access to advanced coursework, but require all middle schools to measure chronic absenteeism.

3. How do states identify schools in need of improvement?

Every three years, states must use the data from their accountability systems (both academic and nonacademic components) to identify those schools “in need of improvement,” which must include the lowest-performing five percent of all schools in the state, schools where one or more subgroups are underperforming, or high schools with graduation rates of less than 67 percent.

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4. What happens in schools identified as in need of improvement?

ESSA requires districts to develop and implement evidence-based strategies—with the involvement of parents and educators—to help schools identified as in need of improvement. As part of this process, districts must also identify any inequitable distribution of resources, such as school funding levels. A state would have to intervene with more rigorous improvement actions if low-performing schools don't meet the state's improvement criteria within four years. Under ESSA, the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program was eliminated, but states are still required to set aside 7 percent of Title I funds for school improvement purposes (an increase over NCLB's required 4 percent set aside).

5. How will states weight the different indicators in their accountability systems?

ESSA allows states to decide how much weight to give their accountability system components, such as student test results and English learner proficiency, but requires that academic factors, in the aggregate, be given more “substantial weight” than nonacademic indicators. Thus, if a state were to measure school climate and student access to advanced coursework as part of its accountability system, results on state tests, English learner proficiency rates, and graduation rates would have to be given greater weight. How much more weight? The U.S. Department of Education may define what “substantial weight” means through the regulatory process.

6. What is the nonacademic indicator that states must use? And can they elect to include more than one?

This decision is left completely up to state decision-makers. The federal government is prohibited from prescribing the measures that states select, but ESSA does require that whatever measures are selected, the same ones must be used in all elementary, middle, and high schools in the state and “meaningfully differentiate” between schools. States can include more than one nonacademic indicator if they choose to do so. ESSA provides specific examples of possible measures—school climate and safety, student or educator engagement, access to advanced coursework, and postsecondary readiness—but specific ones are not mandated nor must it be chosen from the aforementioned list. Other indicators that are being discussed by educators and advocates include chronic absenteeism, discipline referrals, dropout rates, and access to extracurricular and other enrichment opportunities.

The requirement that states include at least one nonacademic measure in their accountability systems is a great victory for whole child advocates who recognize that test scores alone should never be the sole measure of student achievement or the basis for determining educator effectiveness or school success.

7. Are schools and districts still required to disaggregate student subgroup data? Are the subgroups the same?

Most agree that one of the positive aspects of NCLB was data collection and reporting, so ESSA maintains the requirement for data disaggregation for accountability purposes for the following subgroups: race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, and English language learners (ELLs). ESSA also adds three new subgroups for data reporting, but not accountability purposes: homeless status, students with a parent in the military, and students in foster care.

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8. Are all students required to be tested for accountability purposes?

ESSA affirms states' authority over the policies governing parents "opting" their children out of state standardized tests, but it maintains the requirement that 95 percent of children in each school, as well as 95 percent of students in each subgroup, be tested. The big change from NCLB is that schools will not be subject to federally prescribed corrective action if they fail to meet the 95 percent participation rate. Instead, states will establish their own consequences for schools that fail to meet this requirement.

9. Will states continue to make data public through annual report cards?

Yes, states must still issue annual report cards that include the following:

- A detailed description of the state's accountability system
- Schools identified by the state as being in need of support and improvement
- Student test results disaggregated by subgroup
- Student participation rates in assessments
- Student performance on other academic indicators
- Performance on the statewide non-academic indicator
- Graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment
- English language learner proficiency rates
- Per-pupil expenditures of federal, state, and local funds, including actual personnel costs
- Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress
- Teacher qualifications, including those with emergency or provisional status
- The number and percentages of students taking alternative assessments
- Data collected pursuant to the Civil Rights Data Collection survey

States may, of course, collect or include any other information that they choose.