



ESSA Opens the Door for 21st Century Learning

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The winds of federal education policy change are blowing, this time in the right direction. Passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) marks a new chapter in public education. Notwithstanding the important contribution of requiring disaggregation of student data by subgroup, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as well as the Race To The Top initiative represented an unprecedented era of federal control, pressure, and enticement in education policy that required states to follow a prescriptive and, ultimately, unproductive road to reform. Gone are some of the most onerous provisions of NCLB – the singular focus on high-stakes standardized tests that only served to narrow the curriculum, emphasize test preparation, and maintain or widen achievement gaps; the use of student test scores in teacher evaluation -- a practice that is not supported by any credible research evidence; and the punitive approach to rating schools. All of these policies served to discourage many in the teaching profession while driving the joy and curiosity of learning out of classrooms.

In its place, ESSA contains some promising signs. First and foremost, it returns a level of flexibility and control to states in determining their respective accountability systems, and limits the ability of the federal government to influence states on their decisions. Determinations of student and school performance and progress must now be based on multiple indicators, including one non-academic indicator, which allows schools to examine whether all students are extended sufficient opportunities to learn (e.g., enrollment in course sequences that lead to graduating college-ready). This shift reflects the research that says a single score on a test should never stand as the sole measure of a student's knowledge, performance, and intellectual habits, and that the use of a single test for high-stakes decisions is not educationally defensible. Along these lines, up to seven states will be approved to pilot locally developed assessment measures and systems, with the goal of expanding pilots statewide.

These changes recognize that tight policy control from the top has not achieved its intended purpose of elevating the quality and equity of education in our nation. ESSA opens the door to move away from the top-down approach of “hold districts, schools, and students accountable.” We need to capitalize on ESSA to foster student-centered learning environments in which the full diversity of our students can thrive, and which prepare every student for college, career, and participating in a democratic society. Teachers are the primary agents of change in improving curriculum, instruction, and assessment within classrooms; teachers working collaboratively, with guidance, will produce the rich integrated curriculum and assessment that promotes deeper learning. Meaning making, self-direction, communication, and collaboration must be embedded within the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students of today and the future are expected to learn. As a Boston-area principal recently said, “I think that any time kids are doing work that has a greater meaning and purpose for them, they will do better work and they’ll learn more from it.” Through the integration of teacher-generated performance assessments, which allow student choice and agency in demonstrating proficiency through real world experiences over target standards or competencies, a wider array of students – across race, income, language, and disability – will succeed.

Already, several states and consortia of districts are experimenting with new models of accountability. New Hampshire, through a federal waiver, is leading the way with its Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE), in which eight pilot districts are partnering with the New Hampshire Department of Education to demonstrate student academic proficiency and school progress through a set of teacher-generated performance assessments. In California, a set of districts, through the California Office to Reform Education or CORE, is developing a School Quality Improvement System that “is a holistic approach to school improvement and accountability that focuses on academic preparedness, social-emotional skills, the culture and climate of a school, collaborative learning..., and supporting effective instruction.” The New York Performance Standards Consortium, consisting of 38 high schools, has a long-standing waiver from the NY Department of Education to forego all Regents graduation exams except for English language arts and, instead, to make student competency determinations based on a Consortium-defined set of performance tasks in English, math, science, and social studies.

As we move in a direction that enables greater flexibility and experimentation in student accountability at the state and local levels, we need to keep our equity commitment front and center. In a society stratified by race, income, and language, achievement gaps by subgroups will only widen, even within a more student-centered policy climate, without close attention paid to ensuring that students in every subgroup are receiving the resources and support needed to succeed.

ESSA is by no means the perfect piece of education legislation. For example, English Language Learners are required to be included in state test reporting after just one year in US schools, a measure which, in high-stakes test states, may promote higher dropout rates for ELLs. As well, only one percent of students may take an alternative state test, which in states that continue along the path of administering standardized tests may very well deny many deserving students the chance to graduate.

With that said, ESSA opens the door to enable states to rethink what schools and learning of the 21st century should look like. If we believe that every school should nurture life-long learning in every student, in which classrooms are places of exploration, creativity, and discourse, where learning is meaningfully connected to the world outside the school walls, and in which teachers are respected and empowered to design engaging curricula and assessments, then state accountability systems should be recast and reimagined. We now have more flexibility to pursue this lofty goal while upholding a strong commitment to equity. Let’s use it well.



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