



# **Making ESSA's Equity Promise Real: State Strategies to Close the Opportunity Gap**

***A Follow-Up Report to *Advancing Equity for Underserved Youth****

**Stephen Kostyo, Jessica Cardichon, and Linda Darling-Hammond**

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## Executive Summary

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides states, districts, and schools with an opportunity to create greater equity for students in the provision of education, and to accelerate efforts to support historically underserved students by ending the school-to-prison pipeline. This report, a follow-up to the Learning Policy Institute's 2017 report *Advancing Educational Equity for Underserved Youth*, describes which states have used their ESSA plans to focus on measuring and advancing the following goals:

1. **Reduce rates of student suspension.** This can be done through replacing zero-tolerance discipline policies, which have proven ineffective in improving student performance,<sup>1</sup> with interventions to improve student engagement, such as restorative justice practices.
2. **Build a positive school climate**, which is associated with higher student achievement and educational attainment, for all groups of students. This should include giving special attention to the most vulnerable students and promoting social and emotional learning.
3. **Reduce rates of chronic absenteeism.** This can be done by creating early interventions and supporting attendance when needed.
4. **Implement an extended-year graduation rate** (i.e., 5–7 years) alongside the traditional 4-year rate. This can encourage high schools to work with and bring back students who, for a variety of reasons, could not graduate in 4 years.
5. **Expand access to a college- and career-ready curriculum.** Doing so can open a pathway to the future and help students reach their potential, thereby graduating young people who can think critically, solve complex problems, communicate and collaborate with peers effectively, and be self-directed in their learning.

We identify these as “equity indicators” because they aim to open up and strengthen opportunities for learning. Because these indicators, along with the broader accountability indicators required under ESSA, must be reported for all student groups—by student race and ethnicity, economic disadvantage, and language and special education status—they can reveal the disparities that undermine opportunity so that schools may address the resulting gaps and needs.

Since the release of LPI's previous report, all states have received approval of their plans for statewide accountability and improvement systems from the U.S. Department of Education. This report (1) specifies which states have committed to using high-leverage equity indicators of student opportunities to learn in their ESSA plan; (2) describes how they intend to use information from these indicators to create more equitable and inclusive learning environments for all students; and (3) provides guidance and resources to state, district, and school policymakers, practitioners, and equity proponents for the effective measurement and use of each indicator.

### How States Are Using Equity Indicators

Some states are using equity indicators to identify schools for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) or targeted support and improvement (TSI) in their accountability systems under ESSA. In addition, a number of states are using the information from these indicators to inform improvement in identified schools specifically or as part of their broader approaches to continuous school improvement. For example, some states are using data from the indicators in their comprehensive needs assessments, while others are incorporating the indicators into an early

warning system focused on improving high school graduation rates. By including equity indicators for improvement purposes, states, districts, and schools can use data to select the appropriate strategies and supports, and monitor whether they are creating more equitable outcomes for the students most marginalized within the education system.

States are leveraging greater attention to key aspects of education that shape students' opportunities to learn as well as their outcomes in the following ways:

- **Nine states are including a measure of suspension rates in their accountability and improvement systems.** Three of these states are including a measure of suspension in their statewide accountability systems, and six are using this measure to inform specific efforts in schools identified for support and improvement. Three of these six states are also including a student expulsion measure. **An additional 20 states and the District of Columbia** are using suspension rate information within their broader systems to inform continuous school improvement across all schools.
- **Eight states are using student surveys to measure school climate in their accountability systems.** Six of these states are also using survey data to inform their school improvement efforts. **Sixteen additional states describe how they will use strategies for improving school climate** in schools identified for support and improvement or as part of a broader statewide effort. For example, six of these states are providing technical assistance that includes evidence-based strategies for improving school climate in schools, and nine states are supporting a diagnostic/self-assessment process at the school level to identify areas of improvement as they relate to school climate. **Eleven states explicitly mention providing resources and support to schools to improve students' social and emotional learning.** Five of these states are addressing student social and emotional learning as a part of their overall school improvement support efforts.
- **Thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia are using a measure of chronic absenteeism in their accountability and improvement systems.** Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia are including the chronic absenteeism indicator in their accountability systems, and one state is using the indicator to inform efforts in schools identified for support and improvement.
- **Thirty-five states are including extended-year graduation rates in their accountability systems,** recognizing the efforts of schools that provide opportunities to support students who do not graduate in 4 years. Sixteen of these states are measuring a 5-year graduation rate only, and 19 of these states use a 6- or 7-year graduation rate (sometimes in addition to the 4- or 5-year rate).
- **Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia are measuring college- and career-ready learning opportunities** by including measures of student access to, completion of, and/or performance in a **college- and career-ready curriculum** in their accountability systems to identify schools for support and improvement.

Putting forward a plan is the first step in a process of acknowledging and undertaking the work to be done to produce greater opportunity and equity for students. To make the equity promise of ESSA real, these measures need to be combined with appropriate and effective policies and strategies that include authentic monitoring, intentional transparency, and strong communication loops to support students most marginalized by the education system.

## Introduction

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in December 2015, gives states the opportunity to create new approaches to school accountability and continuous improvement. These approaches, if informed by well-chosen indicators of school opportunity and performance, have the potential to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments for historically underserved students. Rather than focusing only on test score gains, states are now encouraged to choose multiple indicators of student progress and achievement, as well as of school quality.

Along with measures of academic achievement (student performance on state assessments in English language arts and mathematics, which may include growth in proficiency), graduation rates, and English language proficiency, ESSA requires states to include at least one indicator of school quality or student success (SQSS). For example, states may include as SQSS indicators measures of student engagement, access to and completion of advanced coursework, postsecondary readiness, or school climate and safety.

All indicators must provide valid, reliable, and comparable information within each state's accountability system. States then use school performance on these indicators to **identify** schools for either CSI or TSI. Districts with such schools can use data from statewide indicators to inform the needs assessments and school improvement plans required under ESSA. States can also select additional indicators to use as part of their **broader continuous school improvement efforts** across all schools, regardless of identification status.

Well-chosen indicators of school conditions and outcomes can leverage greater attention to key aspects of education that shape students' opportunities to learn as well as student outcomes—and to do so in ways that can produce much greater equity.

A 2017 report from the Learning Policy Institute, *Advancing Educational Equity for Underserved Youth*, describes how ESSA provides an opportunity for states to better support historically underserved students and create more inclusive learning environments. Well-chosen indicators of school conditions and outcomes, such as those outlined in the report, have been vetted by a diverse group of stakeholders both inside education agencies and out in communities. These indicators can leverage greater attention to key aspects of education that shape students' opportunities to learn as well as student outcomes—and to do so in ways that can produce much greater equity.



To this end, this report suggests focusing attention on students furthest from opportunity by taking steps to:

- Reduce rates of student **suspension**. This can be done through replacing zero-tolerance discipline policies (which have proven ineffective in improving student performance<sup>2</sup>) with interventions to improve student engagement, such as restorative justice practices.
- Build a positive **school climate** (which is associated with higher student achievement and educational attainment for all groups of students). This should include giving special attention to the most vulnerable students and promoting **social and emotional learning (SEL)**.
- Reduce rates of **chronic absenteeism**. This can be done by creating early interventions and supporting attendance when needed.
- Implement an **extended-year graduation rate** (i.e., 5–7 years), alongside the traditional 4-year rate. This can encourage high schools to work with and bring back students who, for a variety of reasons, could not graduate in 4 years.
- Expand access to a **college- and career-ready curriculum**. Doing so can open a pathway to the future and help students reach their potential, thereby graduating young people who can think critically, solve complex problems, communicate and collaborate with peers effectively, and be self-directed in their learning.

When indicators capturing information on the success of these efforts are reported by race and ethnicity, economic disadvantage, and language and special education status, they illustrate where there are inequalities that should be addressed. In so doing, these indicators can be leveraged by states and districts to create more equitable opportunities and outcomes for students.

## State ESSA Plans

Since the release of *Advancing Educational Equity for Underserved Youth*, all states have received approval from the U.S. Department of Education for their plans for statewide accountability and improvement systems. A number of states are taking advantage of the opportunities provided by ESSA to measure the extent to which their students are supported and provided with equitable educational opportunities. Some states included equity indicators in their ESSA plans to build on previous initiatives, make improvements on issues their communities value, and direct resources to help students furthest from opportunity.

Putting forward a plan is the first step in a process of acknowledging and undertaking the work to be done to produce greater opportunity and equity for students. These equity measures need to be combined with appropriate and effective policies and strategies that include authentic monitoring, intentional transparency, and strong communication loops to support students most marginalized by the education system.

This report identifies states that have committed to using equity indicators in their ESSA plans and describes how some states intend to measure and use information from these indicators to create more equitable and inclusive learning environments for all students.

## Advancing Equity in Accountability and Improvement Systems

A substantial number of states have begun to incorporate key indicators that can support greater equity in their statewide reporting systems. While some states are using these equity indicators in their federal accountability systems to identify schools for intervention and support, others are using them to inform improvement efforts in these identified schools or as part of their broader approaches to continuous school improvement, incorporating the equity indicators into a diagnostic process.

Table 1 summarizes which states are using these indicators and for what purposes: States using the equity indicator to identify schools for CSI or TSI in their accountability systems are denoted by the word *Accountability*; states using the equity indicator to inform improvement efforts in these schools are denoted by the word *Improvement*. Those using the indicator for measurement or improvement purposes, such as statewide data reporting or piloting for possible future use, are denoted by *Other Uses*. These uses can be found for each state through an interactive state map available at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/essa-equity-promise>. As states and districts undertake the important work of improving their educational systems, the way they use these data to evaluate and guide the appropriate evidence-based interventions is critically important. To support states, districts, and schools in this effort, this report also provides guidance and resources for improving the effective use of each measure.

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**Table 1**  
**State Use of Equity Indicators for School Identification or Improvement**  
**Purposes in Their Statewide Accountability Systems**

	Suspension Rates	School Climate	Chronic Absenteeism	Extended-Year Graduation Rates	College- and Career-Readiness
Alabama	Improvement	Improvement	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Alaska	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Not Using
Arizona	Improvement	Improvement	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Arkansas	Improvement	Improvement	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
California	Accountability	Improvement	Accountability	Other Uses	Accountability
Colorado	Other Uses	Improvement	Accountability	Accountability	Other Uses
Connecticut	Other Uses	Improvement	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Delaware	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Florida	Other Uses	Not Using	Other Uses	Not Using	Accountability
Georgia	Other Uses	Improvement	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Hawaii	Other Uses	Improvement	Accountability	Not Using	Not Using
Idaho	Other Uses	Accountability	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability
Illinois	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Indiana	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Iowa	Other Uses	Accountability	Other Uses	Accountability	Other Uses
Kansas	Improvement	Other Uses	Improvement	Not Using	Not Using
Kentucky	Other Uses	Not Using	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Louisiana	Other Uses	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability
Maine	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Other Uses
Maryland	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Massachusetts	Other Uses	Improvement	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Michigan	Other Uses	Improvement	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Minnesota	Improvement	Improvement	Accountability	Accountability	Other Uses
Mississippi	Other Uses	Other Uses	Other Uses	Not Using	Accountability

	Suspension Rates	School Climate	Chronic Absenteeism	Extended-Year Graduation Rates	College- and Career-Readiness
Missouri	Other Uses	Improvement	Accountability	Not Using	Not Using
Montana	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Not Using	Accountability
Nebraska	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Nevada	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
New Hampshire	Other Uses	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability
New Jersey	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Not Using
New Mexico	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
New York	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
North Carolina	Other Uses	Other Uses	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability
North Dakota	Other Uses	Accountability	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability
Ohio	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Oklahoma	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Oregon	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Pennsylvania	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Rhode Island	Accountability	Improvement	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
South Carolina	Other Uses	Accountability	Other Uses	Not Using	Accountability
South Dakota	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Not Using	Accountability
Tennessee	Other Uses	Improvement	Accountability	Other Uses	Accountability
Texas	Other Uses	Not Using	Other Uses	Not Using	Accountability
Utah	Other Uses	Not Using	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability
Vermont	Other Uses	Improvement	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability
Virginia	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Not Using	Not Using
Washington	Improvement	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Washington, DC	Other Uses	Other Uses	Accountability	Not Using	Accountability
West Virginia	Accountability	Other Uses	Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Wisconsin	Other Uses	Improvement	Accountability	Accountability	Other Uses
Wyoming	Other Uses	Not Using	Other Uses	Not Using	Accountability

## Reducing Student Suspension Rates

Over the past several decades, researchers have noted that the overuse of suspensions and expulsions, particularly for students of color, has contributed significantly to dropout rates and the perpetuation of the “school-to-prison pipeline.”<sup>3</sup> Further, students of color and those with disabilities are suspended at a rate that is disproportionate to that of their White and nondisabled peers for comparable behaviors.<sup>4</sup> High rates of school exclusion have been encouraged by zero-tolerance policies, which assign explicit, predetermined punishments to specific violations of school rules, regardless of the situation or the context of the behavior.<sup>5</sup>

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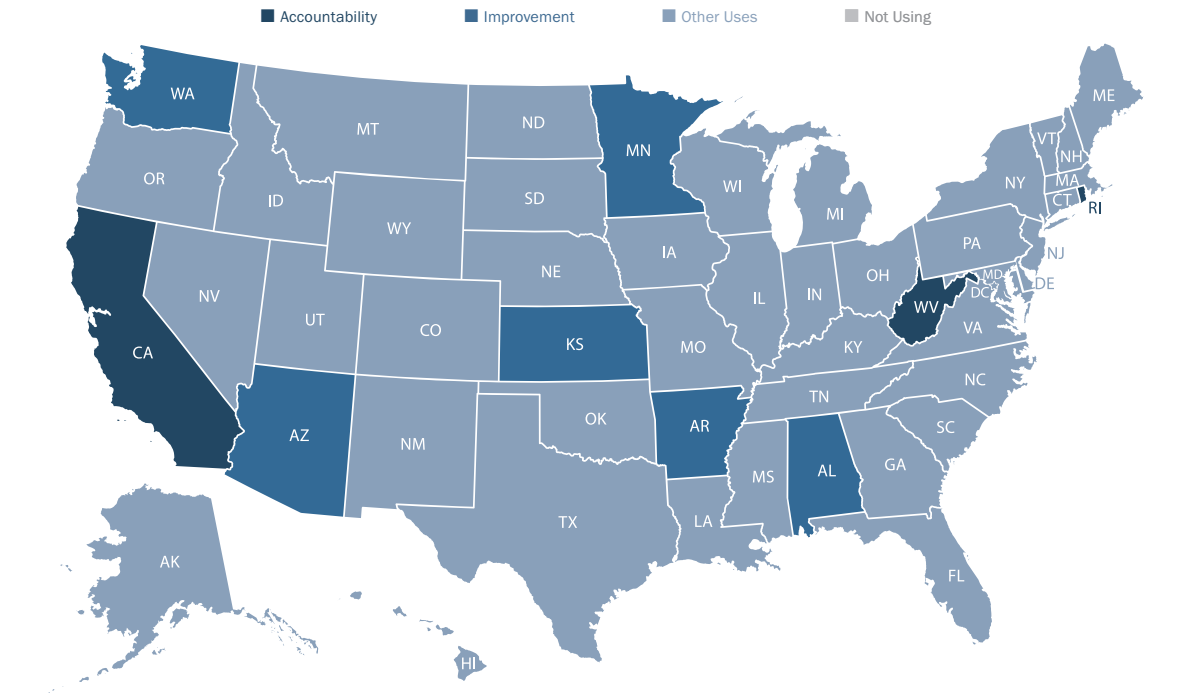
Under ESSA, all states are required to include rates of in-school and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, school-related arrests, referrals to law enforcement, and incidences of school violence (including bullying and harassment), on their state and local report cards. In addition, nine states are including a measure of suspension in their statewide accountability and improvement systems either for school identification (three states) or improvement purposes in these identified schools (six states) (see Figure 1). Three of these states are also including a student expulsion measure for improvement purposes. An additional 20 states and the District of Columbia describe in their state plans how they are using suspension rate information within their broader system to inform continuous school improvement across all schools.

Use of this indicator is intended to incentivize approaches and interventions that improve student engagement in school rather than exclusion from school. For example, states often encourage districts and schools to replace zero-tolerance strategies with effective SEL programs<sup>6</sup> and approaches such as restorative justice.<sup>7</sup>

### Selected State Approaches: California, Rhode Island, and West Virginia

**California** is using a suspension rate indicator in its accountability system to measure school quality for all k–12 students. The state establishes different sets of cut scores for elementary, middle, and high schools. Suspension calculations include both in-school and out-of-school suspensions in the numerator, and the denominator is determined by cumulative enrollment of all students enrolled at a school during the school year.<sup>8</sup> California disaggregates the data at both the school and student-group level, and it compares yearly suspension rates to calculate annual changes. The state supports districts in reducing the overuse of discipline practices that remove students from the classroom by sharing online information on strategies and interventions, such as restorative justice programs and other practices that replace high-risk punitive discipline practices with positive interventions. Finally, California is providing Title I educators with technical assistance in the use of a multi-tiered system of supports to promote positive behavioral practices at the local level.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 1**  
**States Incorporating a Suspension Rate Indicator for School Identification or Improvement Purposes in Their Statewide Accountability Systems**



**Rhode Island** is using student suspension rates as part of its SQSS indicator. The suspension rate measures the number of out-of-school suspensions per 100 students, pre-k through grade 12.<sup>10</sup> Rhode Island reports student suspensions annually for all student subgroups at the state and school level. A statewide repository called InfoWorks allows users to compare schools on multiple related measures, including: (1) the types of infractions that resulted in suspensions, (2) the type of disciplinary response, (3) the relationship between the number of students enrolled and the number of suspensions, and (4) rates of suspensions per 100 students by race.<sup>11</sup>

The Rhode Island Department of Education provides state-developed resources for schools to reduce the need for disciplinary actions, including suspension. These resources will be funded through competitive state grants using ESSA Title IV, Part A funds (Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants) and will include school-based mental health services, mentoring and school counseling, schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports, and programs to reduce exclusionary discipline practices. To identify and share models of best practices to improve school climate, the Rhode Island Department of Education supports a Community of Practice, which hosts open meetings three times a year that provide presentations and opportunities for discussions between educators and practitioners.

**West Virginia** measures disciplinary exclusions in its pre-k–12 accountability system as the percentage of students at each school who receive zero out-of-school suspensions within a school year, reflecting the state’s effort to promote the use of alternative responses that maximize student access to instruction. For example, the West Virginia Department of Education promotes non-exclusionary approaches to discipline, such as positive behavior programs, character education, peer mediation, conflict resolution, prevention of harassment, and responding to intimidation and substance abuse. West Virginia outlines recommendations to schools, such as responding to minor behavior violations with student conferences or changes in the student’s schedule rather than through the use of exclusionary practices.<sup>12</sup> The state supports districts in using a tiered intervention approach that includes a comprehensive system of mental health services for students and provides training for educators in how to use both the state’s early warning system and a longitudinal data system that will allow educators to sort and filter data based on academics, attendance, behavior, and other available data. As a result, educators are able to make timely and actionable subgroup-specific decisions that reduce disparities between student groups.<sup>13</sup>

The West Virginia Department of Education promotes non-exclusionary approaches to discipline, such as positive behavior programs, character education, peer mediation, conflict resolution, prevention of harassment, and responding to intimidation and substance abuse.

## Policy Considerations for Implementation

States and districts can improve the utility of their suspension indicator and help schools respond productively by:

- Eliminating zero-tolerance policies and the use of suspensions and expulsions for lower-level offenses, replacing them with supportive, inclusive, and effective strategies<sup>14</sup> that address student misbehavior with alternatives that teach responsibility, including restorative justice programs that emphasize repairing the harm caused by problematic behavior.<sup>15</sup>
- Establishing statewide systems of restorative justice programs to increase student access to and educator preparation for these programs.
- Creating data systems that provide schools with access to the information needed to assess patterns in rates of suspension or expulsion (e.g., specific classrooms, grade levels, times of year, etc.) and allow for timely intervention by school or district leadership. For example, if some schools suspend students around testing time to avoid including these students in their accountability metrics, the pattern would become apparent and could be flagged for attention by district leaders.

- Providing both schoolwide professional development for teachers and targeted coaching based on classroom-level data. Because research indicates that there is a relationship between a high suspension rate and a higher than average number of novice teachers or those without preparation, such training might be particularly focused on educators in their early careers.<sup>16</sup>
- Providing training on implicit bias and asset-based youth development<sup>17</sup> for teachers, administrators, school resource officers, police, juvenile judges, and others working with children and youth.<sup>18</sup>
- Tracking multiple suspensions for individual students; the average length of suspensions; and the number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions so that the state, district, and school will have an accurate picture of the extent to which students are losing instructional time and can explore the impact of any interventions on individual students as a basis for problem solving for those students and for the system.

While building productive alternatives, it is also important for states and districts to avoid counterproductive alternatives by, for example:

- Prohibiting the use of corporal punishment in public schools—which is used disproportionately with African American students—in the 19 states that still allow it.<sup>19</sup>
- Eliminating referrals to law enforcement for all nonviolent, noncriminal offenses by developing model school discipline policy and agreements that clarify the distinction between educator and law-enforcement discipline.<sup>20</sup>

## Resources on Suspension and Expulsion Rates

**School Discipline Organizations and Resources** (American Association of School Administrators and the Children’s Defense Fund). This resource provides an overview of organizations and resources that provide focused supports relating to improving discipline.<sup>21</sup>

**Meaningful Local Engagement Under ESSA: A Handbook for LEA and School Leaders** (Council of Chief State School Officers and Partners for Each and Every Child). This handbook offers several resources for policies that remove police from schools, replacing them with effective staff-led strategies for classroom management, conflict resolution, and mediation.<sup>22</sup>

**Locked Out of the Classroom: How Implicit Bias Contributes to Disparities in School Discipline** (NAACP Legal Defense Fund). This report examines how disparities in school discipline result from implicit bias and perpetuate stereotypes and provides interventions to help improve relationships between teachers and students.<sup>23</sup>

**Understanding Implicit Bias: What Educators Should Know** (American Federation of Teachers). This article describes the importance of addressing implicit bias in education, how unconscious attitudes can affect disciplinary decisions, and how teachers can mitigate the effects of implicit bias.<sup>24</sup>

**Supporting and Responding to Behavior: Evidence-Based Classroom Strategies for Teachers** (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs). This document summarizes evidence-based, positive, proactive, and responsive classroom behavior intervention and support strategies for teachers.<sup>25</sup>



## Building a Positive School Climate<sup>26</sup>

**School climate** is often thought of as “how a school feels;” that is, whether it feels safe and supportive for students, staff, and families. A positive school climate reflects a school’s “norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.”<sup>27</sup> SEL supports a positive school climate. Explicit teaching of social and emotional competencies allows children and adults to “acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”<sup>28</sup> School climate and SEL are linked because, as students and school personnel refine their social and emotional competence, school climate improves, just as the existence of a positive school climate creates the atmosphere within which SEL can take place.<sup>29</sup>

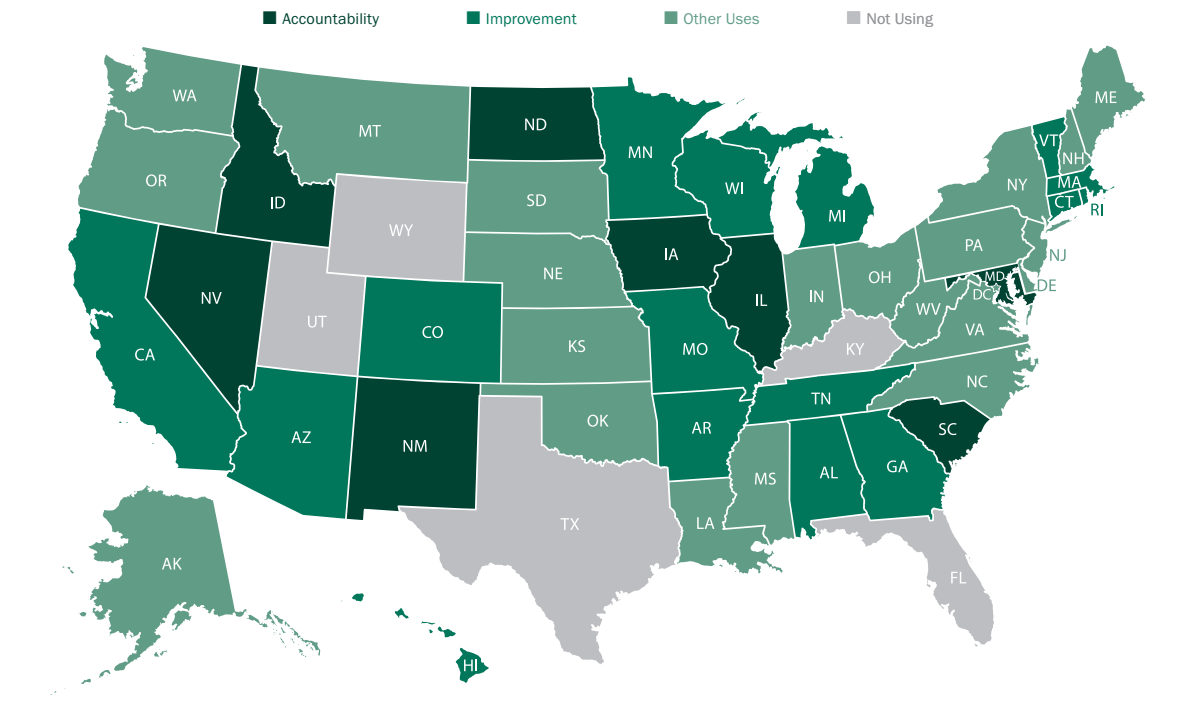
A positive school climate can be measured in an accountability and improvement system through student surveys and on-site reviews of practice, such as School Quality Reviews, during which teams observe classrooms and the organization of the school as a whole, and receive feedback from families and school leaders in order to provide action steps to better serve students. Surveys typically measure a school’s safety; relationships among students, staff, and families; the teaching and learning environment; and institutional factors, such as facility quality or resource availability.<sup>30</sup> Surveys may also measure the degree to which a school is supportive of students’ social and emotional development by, for example, helping them learn to resolve conflicts with peers. Disaggregation of survey results by subgroup is important because student experiences often vary significantly, even within a single school.<sup>31</sup>

Measuring school climate can shine a light on important school practices that are often overlooked and send a signal from the state to districts and schools that creating a positive school environment in which students feel safe and connected is a priority.

Individual students’ social and emotional skills can also be measured for school-level improvement purposes through surveys, teacher observation tools such as rubrics, or performance assessments.<sup>32</sup> Such surveys can measure whether students feel—or their teachers perceive—they have learned to identify their own emotions and strengths (self-awareness); are able to persevere even when they feel frustrated (self-management); can feel empathy and learn from people with other opinions or experiences (social awareness); and are able to interact productively in interpersonal relationships, including resolving conflicts (relationship skills). However, researchers caution that data from these measures should not be used for high-stakes purposes, such as school identification, because student-level assessments could become distorted under high-stakes conditions, putting pressure on students or adults to report their self-perceptions or perceptions of others less honestly, and are better suited for improvement purposes.

Measuring school climate can shine a light on important school practices that are often overlooked and send a signal from the state to districts and schools that creating a positive school environment in which students feel safe and connected is a priority. This attention may incentivize the development of positive school cultures through improved teaching strategies and schoolwide

**Figure 2**  
**States Incorporating a School Climate Indicator for School Identification or Improvement Purposes in Their Statewide Accountability Systems**



initiatives in which students are supported socially, emotionally, and academically. Analysis of disaggregated results may lead to intervention and support opportunities for the least engaged youth or subgroups of students disproportionately impacted. A focus on school climate can also encourage educators to create a more welcoming environment for effective family engagement.

Eight states are measuring school climate in their accountability system by using student surveys (see Figure 2). Six of these states are also using data from these surveys to inform their school improvement efforts. Sixteen additional states describe strategies for improving school climate in schools identified for support and improvement or as part of a broader statewide effort. For example, six of these states<sup>53</sup> are providing technical assistance to schools that includes evidence-based strategies for improving school climate, and nine states<sup>54</sup> are supporting the diagnostic/self-assessment process at the school level to identify areas of improvement as they relate to school climate.

Although not specifically using school climate data for accountability or improvement purposes, 12 additional states describe efforts to make school climate data available. Six of these states will report information from student survey data. While the remaining six states do not provide details as to which measures of school climate will be reported, under ESSA all states are required to collect and report on rates of in-school and out-of-school suspensions; expulsions; school-related arrests; referrals to law enforcement; and incidences of school violence, including bullying and harassment. Therefore all states will have these school climate data available.

Finally, 11 states explicitly mention providing resources and support to schools to improve students' social and emotional learning. Five of these states are including addressing student social and emotional learning as a part of their overall school improvement support efforts.<sup>55</sup>

## Selected State Approaches: Iowa, Maryland, and Ohio

**Iowa** measures school climate through the Iowa Youth Survey: Conditions for Learning. The survey asks students about their engagement, views of school, and feelings of safety on campus. It is given to students biannually as part of a broader Iowa Safe and Supportive Schools measure that includes surveys of students, staff, and parents. Because indicators in the accountability plan must be able to be disaggregated by student subgroups, only the student responses from this set of surveys are included in the state's ESSA accountability plan. The Iowa Department of Education implements the student survey in collaboration with the Iowa Department of Public Health for grades 5 through 12. Iowa has a process and timeline to adapt the survey to apply to students in grades 3 and 4 with potential companion staff and parent and guardian surveys.<sup>36</sup>

**Maryland** is using school climate surveys of students and educators as an accountability indicator in all grades. The state is currently collaborating with REL-Mid Atlantic and Mathematica to develop the appropriate survey instrument. Both student and educator surveys will include items in the same four domains: relationships, safety, engagement, and environment. These domains include the following subtopics: cultural and linguistic competence, relationships, school participation, emotional safety, physical safety, bullying, substance abuse, emergency readiness, physical environment, instructional environment, physical health, mental health, and discipline.<sup>37</sup> To respond to the data provided by school climate and other indicators, the Maryland Department of Education will develop and implement a multi-tiered system of support that will include partnerships between schools and community members to further sustain conflict resolution programs, reduce and eliminate disproportionality in discipline, provide a Youth Mental Health First Aid curriculum for staff, and implement wraparound services.

The **Ohio** Department of Education is structuring a portion of the state's Title IV, Part A funds to pilot different school climate surveys including students, and possibly educators and/or parents as well. By helping schools implement the surveys, the state will also test each survey's feasibility for statewide use. Ohio fosters school climate improvement using the Ohio School Climate Guidelines that list key benchmarks, such as measuring student engagement, parental involvement, and community connection with the school. These guidelines also list suggested strategies schools and districts can use to

To address other aspects of school climate, Ohio publishes an anti-bullying guidance document and offers training and technical assistance to help schools monitor the broad impact of harassment, intimidation, and bullying.

improve school climate, such as encouraging teachers to greet students by name when they enter the classroom, make time for students to reflect on what they have learned, and maintain contact with parents.<sup>38</sup> Ohio uses the guidelines as a framework for supporting professional development and information dissemination at the district level. To address other aspects of school climate, Ohio publishes an anti-bullying guidance document and offers training and technical assistance to help schools monitor the broad impact of harassment, intimidation, and bullying.<sup>39</sup> The state also reports student-level school discipline data on report cards published on the Department of Education's website. Finally, the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services works

on three grant initiatives that specifically focus on the use of collaborative efforts between school staff and community partners to create safe and secure schools and promote behavioral and mental wellness among students.<sup>40</sup>

Ohio is also one of a significant number of states participating in the Collaborating States Initiative, in which states partner with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to develop a plan to meet the unique needs of their students and families and to identify resources and best practices. These resources can include restorative justice discipline strategies, strategies to improve cultural competence and promote culturally relevant curricula, and trauma-informed education approaches.

## Policy Considerations for Implementation

States and districts can help schools improve their climate by:

- Leveraging school improvement funding or Title IV grants under ESSA to implement school climate surveys and improve school climate and SEL strategies. Local education agencies (LEAs) can partner with community-based organizations to create or build on existing interventions regarding youth development, parent engagement, and/or mental and behavioral health.<sup>41</sup>
- Identifying ways to acknowledge success and share best practices of schools that have improved school climate, including support for conferences and peer networks among schools to share strategies that work.
- Providing schools with resources and technical assistance as they seek to interpret school climate surveys and develop responses to what they find. Staff need to be trained in the analysis of the data they collect and the implementation of high-quality programs, professional development, and school organizational changes that support students' development based upon that analysis. State-level support may include technical assistance for program development, widely available professional development, and the provision of state and federal funding to support schools' efforts.<sup>42</sup>

## Resources for School Climate

**School Climate Guide for District Policymakers and Education Leaders** (Center for Social and Emotional Education and the National School Boards Association). This guide highlights districts that are using the National School Climate Standards and provides a framework state decision makers can follow to utilize school climate measures.<sup>43</sup>

**School Climate Measurement and Analysis** (National School Climate Center). This brief by the National School Climate Center (NSCC) provides practical advice for schools that are trying to implement measures of school climate and effectively use student responses to improve student achievement.<sup>44</sup>

**Safe Space Kit** (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network). This guide to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students in schools provides steps for schools to build safe spaces as well as resources to help students become allies to LGBT students.<sup>45</sup>

## Eliminating Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism—often defined as missing 10% or more of the school year—negatively impacts students’ school performance, high school graduation rates, and students’ overall success in adulthood. For example, students who are chronically absent score lower on tests, on average, than students with better attendance, after controlling for race or socioeconomic status.<sup>46</sup> Chronic absenteeism in early grades has been found to predict students’ levels of success in later grades and the likelihood of dropping out of school. Students of color are disproportionately chronically absent compared to their White peers. Latinx students are 11% more likely to be chronically absent, African American students are 36% more likely, and Native American and Pacific Islander students are over 65% more likely to miss significant school time.<sup>47</sup>

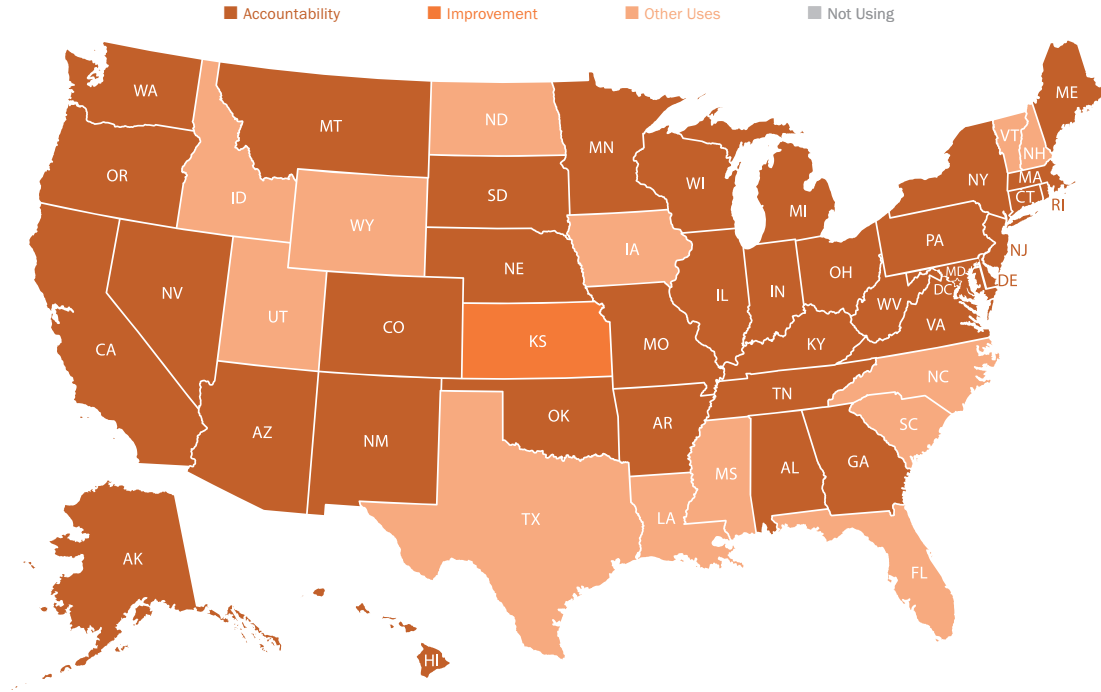
Ensuring that all students receive the support they need to remain present and engaged in learning throughout their k–12 experience begins with obtaining an accurate picture of how much instructional time students are losing and why. Because individual chronically absent students are out of school on different days, chronic absences could be masked by average daily attendance data. For example, a school with 90% average daily attendance for the year might have 30% or more of its students chronically absent. Chronic absenteeism is a more accurate measure for tracking individual student attendance.

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Data from this indicator can illuminate patterns in student absences by school, grade, and student subgroup. Once staff identify the reasons behind these patterns, they can implement interventions that address issues ranging from health concerns, student disengagement, anxiety, and fear of bullying to lack of transportation, homelessness, and students’ efforts to help their families by working or caring for children at home. Schools have reduced chronic absenteeism by partnering disengaged students with mentors or arranging for teacher home visits to build relationships and develop solutions between students, parents, and schools. Chronic absenteeism data can also inform systems for teachers and administrators to intervene early when students miss class.<sup>48</sup>

Thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia are using a measure of chronic absenteeism in their accountability and improvement systems (see Figure 3). Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia are using this as an indicator to help identify schools for support and improvement. One additional state, Kansas, is using rates of chronic absenteeism to inform efforts in schools already identified for support and improvement. The remaining 14 states are reporting rates of chronic absenteeism as required by ESSA.

**Figure 3**  
**States Incorporating a Chronic Absenteeism Rate Indicator for School Identification or Improvement Purposes in Their Statewide Accountability Systems**



**Selected State Approaches:  
 Connecticut, Indiana, and Virginia**

**Connecticut** includes chronic absenteeism as a k–12 accountability measure and set a goal of cutting average statewide rates to 5%.<sup>49</sup> To do so, the state uses a multi-tiered approach that emphasizes early prevention, such as providing mentors who serve as caring adults who remind students of the importance of school attendance and create tailored attendance plans. Students who need more intensive interventions receive case management. Connecticut collects chronic absenteeism data, makes it publicly available through its reporting system, and has built-in checks to ensure the quality of the data. These checks include creating district and school attendance review teams, conducting data audits, and routinely analyzing attendance data.<sup>50</sup>

Connecticut uses a multi-tiered approach that emphasizes early prevention, such as providing mentors who serve as caring adults who remind students of the importance of school attendance and create tailored attendance plans.

As a part of its federal accountability system, **Indiana** uses a chronic absenteeism indicator to measure both the share of students who are attending school regularly and those who are improving their attendance. Schools are provided with individual student data so they are able to intervene with students whose attendance is low and not improving.<sup>51</sup> Indiana’s chronic absenteeism indicator also rewards schools for students who meet a statewide definition of a “model attendee,” which is defined by the state as either a student who attends at least 96% of the days he or she was enrolled during the school year (persistent attendance) or a student who attends 3% more days than he or she did in the previous school year (improved attendance). The state’s goal is for at least 80% of students to be model attendees. As is the case with the definition of the model attendee, to control for consistency across the state, Indiana created a uniform definition of what counts as an absence. The state’s uniform definition of “attendance” includes being physically present in school or at another location at which the school’s educational program is being conducted (for example, a field trip or other school-sanctioned event).

Like many states, **Virginia** is using chronic absenteeism as an SQSS indicator for all levels. Based on research, the state set a long-term statewide goal for all students and all subgroups to have an average chronic absenteeism rate of no more than 10% by 2024. (In the 2014–15 school year, the statewide average chronic absenteeism rate was 18.3%.) Additional research regarding chronic absenteeism in Virginia suggests that in order to achieve equitable attendance among all subgroups, districts have to focus resources on high school students, low-performing students, and students who move between schools.<sup>52</sup>

Virginia is working to achieve this goal through a partnership with Attendance Works by creating a set of online modules that help teachers and administrators stress the importance of attendance in their communications to students and parents.<sup>53</sup> Staff trainings to identify strategies that can improve attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism are also planned. In its data analysis, Virginia will focus on the absenteeism of students experiencing homelessness to identify additional supports for these students and their families. Additional supports include providing access to school social workers, school psychologists, and coordinators to help homeless students attend school regularly, especially during times those students are most likely to be chronically absent, such as when they are transitioning between schools.<sup>54</sup>

In its data analysis, Virginia will focus on the absenteeism of students experiencing homelessness to identify additional supports for these students and their families.

## Policy Considerations for Implementation

States and districts can better measure and help reduce chronic absenteeism by:

- Creating clear definitions of what counts as an absence. Having a uniform definition allows for easier data comparison and analysis. This includes developing and maintaining a consistent definition of partial-day absence and how it counts toward overall attendance. For example, if one district aggregates class periods missed and another district does not keep track of periods missed unless a student has missed a half day or more, then comparisons may misrepresent student attendance patterns.<sup>55</sup>
- Including both in-school and out-of-school suspensions in the definition of what counts as an absence, because both result in lost learning time.
- Ensuring that rates of absences are measured and patterns of chronic absence are addressed at all grade levels.
- Incorporating chronic absenteeism data into early warning systems that also measure discipline incidents, course performance, and credit accumulation. These systems allow staff to identify students at risk of dropping out and to examine performance on each of these indicators within the context of other related indicators in order to diagnose concerns and provide timely interventions.<sup>56</sup>
- Sponsoring professional development and forming communities of practice among educators to share resources on how to connect schools with integrated student supports, develop reliable means of monitoring attendance, and create schoolwide systems to reduce chronic absence.

### Resources on Chronic Absenteeism

**Portraits of Change: Aligning School and Community Resources to Reduce Chronic Absence** (Attendance Works and the Everyone Graduates Center). This brief provides a national and state analysis of schools facing high levels of chronic absence, discusses the implications for state and local action, and provides examples of initiatives to reduce chronic absence.<sup>57</sup>

**Chronic Absenteeism: A Key Indicator of Student Success** (Education Commission of the States). This guide highlights state and local efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism and provides policy recommendations to improve the efficacy of measuring attendance.<sup>58</sup>

**Addressing the Problem of Chronic Absenteeism: A Promising School-Community Partnership** (Communities In Schools). This brief presents examples of how school districts organize and use integrated student supports to improve student attendance.<sup>59</sup>



## Implementing an Extended-Year Graduation Rate

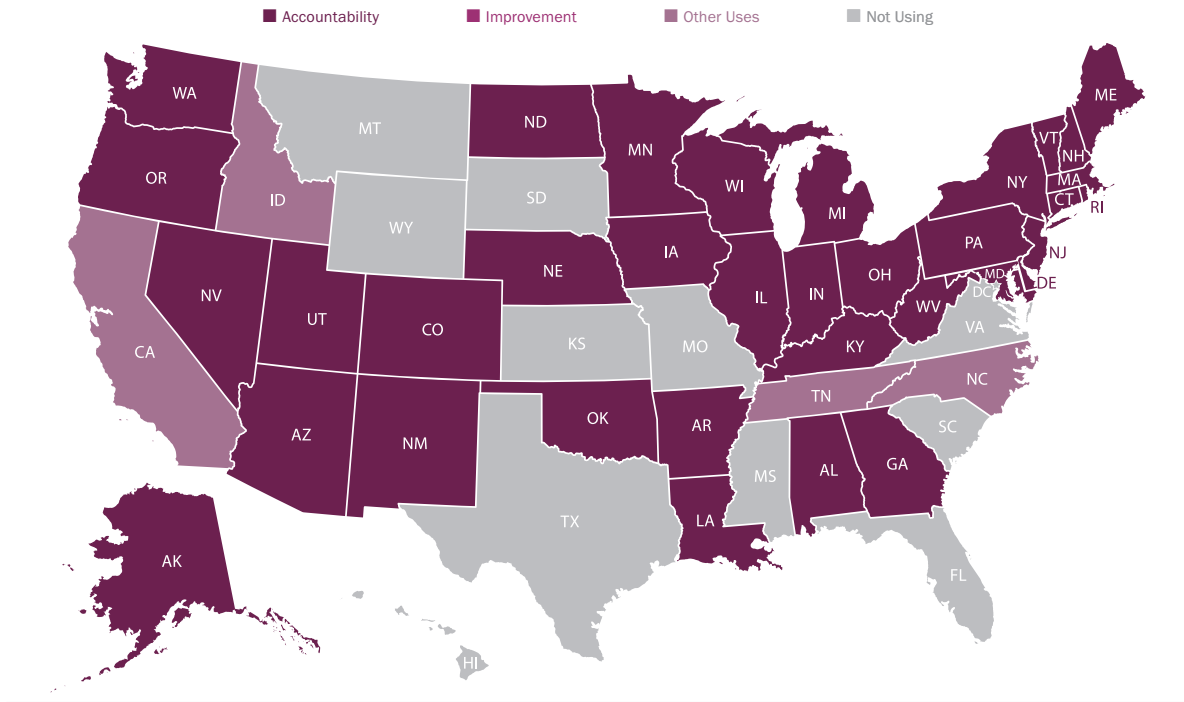
Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, federal accountability has focused on the 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate. Although this approach has provided a much-needed common measure of graduation, when used in an accountability system, it removes incentives and recognition for schools to keep working with struggling youth to help them graduate in 5 or 6 years. For a variety of reasons, it is extremely challenging for some students to graduate in 4 years. Those reasons may include everything from incarceration, health issues, pregnancy, and employment necessary for subsistence to missing credits for those with educational gaps or special needs, or who have immigrated with little prior education. Since students who are unable to graduate on time are often low-achieving, there is little incentive to keep them in school, because they depress both achievement and graduation rate indicators when only a 4-year graduation rate is used.

Given that 1 in 5 students does not graduate within 4 years (with much higher proportions in high-need communities), incentives are needed to recognize the efforts of schools that continue to work with these students through successful graduation.<sup>60</sup> Effective practices for increasing graduation rates focus on:

- extra academic supports for students who have greater educational needs;
- social services and other wraparound supports for students whose needs extend beyond the academic;
- curriculum, instruction, and assessments designed to help students engage in the learning process and fill gaps in their prior learning experiences while they develop analytic, collaboration, and communication skills;
- formative assessments that enable teachers to understand how and what students are learning so they can support student mastery of content, skills, and dispositions;
- school structures that support personalization and connections to adults within the school and the community outside of school;
- teachers working together to focus on students' strengths, interests, and needs; to engage in their own learning; and to collaborate on the improvement of their instructional practices; and
- leadership that is shared, with a focus on incorporating the voices of students, teachers, staff, administrators, and parents in key decisions meant to support student success.<sup>61</sup>

ESSA creates opportunities for states to include increased support for students who are unlikely to graduate in 4 years. Currently, 35 states include extended-year graduation rates in their accountability and improvement systems (see Figure 4). Sixteen of these states are measuring a 5-year graduation rate only, and 19 states use a 6- or 7-year graduation rate (sometimes in addition to the 4- or 5-year rate). Two additional states are reporting a 5-year graduation rate and two other states are in the process of developing or piloting a 5-year graduation rate that will be incorporated into their accountability and improvement system in the 2019–20 school year.

**Figure 4**  
**States Incorporating an Extended-Year Graduation Rate Indicator for School Identification or Improvement Purposes in Their Statewide Accountability Systems**



### Selected State Approaches: Illinois, New Jersey, and New Mexico

**Illinois** incorporated extended-year graduation data into its accountability system in 2012. These data are collected consistently across all LEAs serving high school students. The state’s goal, by 2032, is to have 90% of its students graduate college- and career-ready in 4 years, 92% in 5 years, and 92.5% in 6 years.<sup>62</sup> The Illinois State Board of Education evaluates state-level data to identify the groups of students most unlikely to meet the 4-year graduation requirements to determine its extended-year cohorts and will continue to convene a Technical Advisory Council to make amendments to the state ESSA plan as additional data become available.

Schools that struggle to achieve their graduation goals, especially schools identified for CSI or TSI, have access to the statewide system of support, IL-EMPOWER, which helps schools participate in a needs analysis to identify improvement targets in one or more of the following areas: Governance and Management, Curriculum and Instruction, and Climate and Culture. Once schools identify the areas in which they need support, an IL-EMPOWER-approved partner connects with them to implement strategies to meet school-identified targets. Possible strategies focus on capacity building with an emphasis on data competency, resource management, developing leadership, cultural awareness, communication strategies, professional learning communities, universal design for learning, and social and emotional learning.<sup>63</sup>

**New Jersey** includes in the graduation rate indicator the percentage of students who graduate within 5 years of entering 9th grade. The state tracks 4- and 5-year graduation rates with the statewide goal of having 95% of its students graduate within 4 years and 96% within 5 years by 2030, with the same long-term goal for every subgroup. In its school performance reports, the New Jersey

As New Jersey set new graduation goals for its schools, it also increased the rigor of its graduation requirements.

Department of Education currently tracks both 4-year and extended-year graduation rates for high schools separately, and it will also continue this practice while investigating the feasibility of using an extended-year graduation rate of 6 or 7 years as part of its continuous improvement process. The Department uses both 4- and 5-year graduation rates to calculate an overall combined graduation rate for schools. It is important to note that, as New Jersey set these new graduation goals, it also increased the rigor of its graduation requirements. These new requirements may require the state to set updated graduation baselines and targets for students as part of the state's continuous improvement process.

**New Mexico** tracks 4-, 5-, and 6-year graduation rates, with the statewide goal, by 2022, of having 85% of its students graduate in 4 years, 88% in 5 years, and 90% in 6 years. For school identification purposes, the 4-year graduation rate has more influence on a school's overall rating than the 5- and 6-year rates, although the extended-year weights are factored into the rating. The state's intent is to place primacy on graduating students in the standard number of years while also recognizing students who graduate in 5 or 6 years. New Mexico also uses multiple years of graduation rate data to calculate growth in the 4-year graduation rate. This indicator of growth in graduation rates counts as an SQSS indicator within the accountability system. New Mexico supports its graduation goals with programs to increase parental engagement; the creation of individualized Next Step Plans for each student, beginning at age 12; and priority placement in classes that meet graduation requirements for students experiencing disruptions in education.<sup>64</sup>

## Policy Considerations for Implementation

States and districts can improve graduation rates by:

- Focusing on supporting the needs of the whole student. All students, and high-need students in particular, can benefit from integrated student supports that offer health care, mental health resources, and other social services, as well as after-school supports, mentoring, and tutoring—all of which can make a difference in graduation rates. A community school approach that incorporates these elements has been shown to increase graduation rates in many settings.<sup>65</sup>
- Reducing suspension rates through investments in SEL and restorative practices. As noted earlier, high rates of suspension increase the likelihood of students dropping out of high school.<sup>66</sup>
- Creating advisory systems and small schools or small learning communities within larger schools that allow students to be well known. These approaches have been found to support higher graduation rates.<sup>67</sup>

- Focusing on 9th grade success, which strongly predicts graduation rates, by offering summer transition programs, identifying students at risk of falling behind in credits to ensure appropriate interventions, and providing additional supports for academic success.<sup>68</sup>
- Utilizing data systems to effectively track whether students are making the transition from middle school to high school. While creating a more accurate picture of graduation rates, this can also trigger efforts to find and enroll the sometimes sizable number of students who otherwise fail to enroll in high school and discover how to meet their needs. These data can also help districts identify whether additional supports may be needed for some groups of students during the transition from middle school to high school.<sup>69</sup>

States can also more accurately track graduation rates by creating transparent and consistent practices. These include, for example, clarifying that LEAs must:

- Ensure that student enrollment in each school’s 9th grade cohort is counted no later than October 1 of the school year. ESSA requires that the determination of cohort membership be no later than the date by which student data must be collected annually by the state for submission to the National Center for Education Statistics under the Education Sciences Reform Act. This date is October 1 and is not often known to LEAs.
- Obtain the written documentation necessary to remove students from their graduating cohort.<sup>70</sup>
- Exclude students receiving a General Education Development (GED) certificate from graduation rate calculations, as required by ESSA.

## Resources on Extended-Year Graduation Rates

**Preventable Failure: Improvements in Long-Term Outcomes When High Schools Focused on the Ninth Grade Year** (The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research). This report describes additional strategies to support on-track graduation efforts during the pivotal transition from middle school to high school.<sup>71</sup>

**2018 Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Raising High School Graduation Rates** (The Everyone Graduates Center). This is the most recent update of the Everyone Graduates Center’s campaign to raise high school graduation rates.<sup>72</sup>

**Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy for Equitable School Improvement** (Learning Policy Institute). This report provides guidance to school, district, and state leaders as they consider, propose, or implement a community school intervention in schools targeted for comprehensive support.<sup>73</sup>

**Transforming the High School Experience: How New York City’s New Small Schools Are Boosting Student Achievement and Graduation Rates** (MDRC). This report describes how a large system of small public high schools can be created and can markedly improve graduation prospects for many disadvantaged students.<sup>74</sup>

**CASEL Program Guides: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs** (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning). The CASEL Guide provides a systematic framework for evaluating the quality of social and emotional programs and shares best-practice guidelines for district and school teams on how to select and implement SEL programs. Finally, it offers recommendations for future priorities to advance SEL research and practice.<sup>75</sup>

## Expanding Access to a College- and Career-Ready Curriculum

Lack of access to a meaningful, relevant curriculum affects student achievement, graduation rates, and postsecondary success.<sup>76</sup> A large body of research has shown that students have differential access to college preparatory curriculum and to high-quality career-technical programs that can lead to skilled employment in the modern economy.<sup>77</sup> For example, schools with high proportions of students of color are much less likely to offer advanced courses such as calculus, and, across schools, students of color are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and Gifted and Talented Programs—the kinds of settings in which higher order skills are most purposefully developed.<sup>78</sup> Research has also found that schools serving African American, Latinx, and Native American students are “bottom heavy”—that is, they offer fewer academic courses or high-end career-technical options and more remedial and vocational courses training for low-status occupations.<sup>79</sup> By including information regarding student access to and completion of college- and career-ready curricula in their accountability plans, states can incentivize increasing students’ curriculum opportunities and reveal whether additional resources and supports are needed.<sup>80</sup>

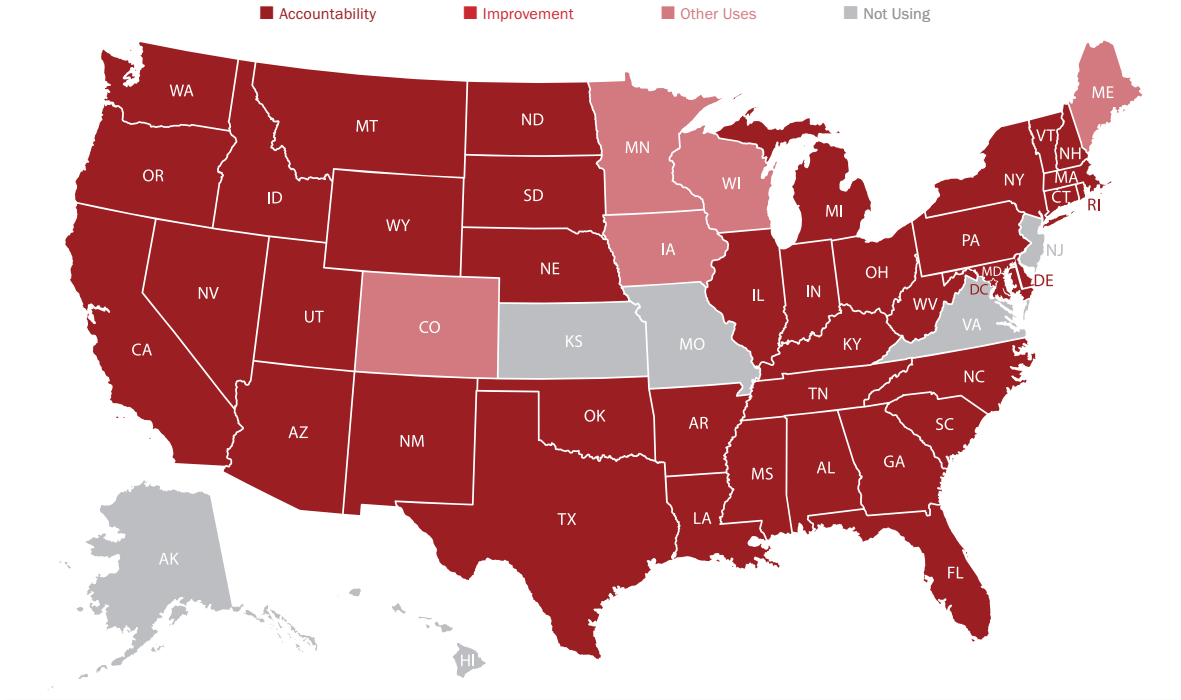
Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia are including information regarding student access to, completion of, and/or performance in a college- and career-ready curriculum in their accountability and improvement systems. Five additional states are planning on incorporating indicators of postsecondary education or workforce readiness, such as completion of advanced coursework, in their accountability and improvement systems in the future. One of these states is also developing a career- and college-ready measure as part of its early warning system that will be reported in its online school dashboard.

### Selected State Approaches: Delaware, New York, and South Carolina

**Delaware** uses a number of measures of college and career preparedness in grades 9–12 in its statewide accountability system. Delaware’s college preparedness options include completing an AP test with a 3 or better, completing an International Baccalaureate (IB) test with a 4 or better, and postsecondary education credit attainment with a B or better in a course that goes beyond the state course of study for high school. The state’s career preparedness options also include completing an approved industry credential, demonstrating proficiency in an additional language to qualify for a Certificate of Multiliteracy, postsecondary credit attainment with a B or higher within a state-approved program of study, successful completion of an approved cooperative education and/or work-based learning extension, or an Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) General Technical (GT) score of 50 or higher. Delaware tracks postsecondary education outcomes, which are reported and calculated based on the percentage of students who enroll in a postsecondary institution within 1 year after completing high school. These data are included in the state’s College and Career Preparedness indicator in an effort to ensure students are prepared after leaving high school.<sup>81</sup> Delaware also uses a 9th grade on-track indicator, which measures the percentage of high school freshmen earning full credits in English, mathematics, science, and social studies classes by the end of the school year.

**New York** is using a College, Career, and Civic Readiness Index as a measure of SQSS. The state gives credit to schools for students who pass high school courses in the college-preparatory Regents course of study and additional credit for students who achieve specified scores on nationally

**Figure 5  
States Incorporating a College- and Career-Ready Indicator for School Identification or Improvement Purposes in Their Statewide Accountability Systems**



recognized exams such as AP and IB tests associated with those courses. Schools are also rewarded for students who participate and earn credit in dual-enrollment courses. Additional elements of the indicator include successful completion of a career-technical course of study, receipt of an industry-recognized credential, and completion of the Seal of Biliteracy. New York will be looking for ways to integrate civic readiness into this indicator.

The state supports college- and career-ready efforts for students who are historically underrepresented in postsecondary education through state-grant-funded pathways, including the Smart Scholars Early College High School Program, in which institutions of higher education (IHEs) partner with public school districts to create Early College high schools. These schools provide students with the opportunity to accelerate the completion of their high school studies while earning transferable college credits. In addition, New York State Pathways in Technology is a state-funded initiative in which IHEs and industry partners work with schools to enable students to graduate with a high school diploma and associate degree, as well as an offer of employment, in 6 years. Moreover, New York is aligning teacher leadership efforts with its goal of preparing each student for success in college, career, and citizenship. These teacher leadership programs will create opportunities for distinguished teachers, principals, and other school leaders to share their expertise with their colleagues in areas such as designing student performance assessments. High-quality student performance tasks, when used consistently throughout a student’s career, can support the development of the higher order skills valued by postsecondary institutions and employers.<sup>82</sup>

**South Carolina** is measuring college and career readiness using two student success indicators—the College and Career Readiness indicator and the Prepared for Success indicator. The College and Career Readiness indicator is based on whether the student completes or earns one or more of the following nine metrics: (1) an AP test with a 3 or higher; (2) an IB test with a 4 or better; (3) a composite score of 1020 or higher on the SAT; (4) a composite score of 20 or higher on the ACT; (5) at least 6 credit hours in dual-credit courses with a grade of C or higher; (6) a Career and Technology Education (CATE) Work-Based Certification program with a state- or nationally recognized industry credential; (7) a Silver, Gold, or Platinum National Career Readiness Certificate on WorkKeys assessments; (8) a scaled score of 31 or higher on the ASVAB; or (9) a registered apprenticeship through a state-approved program. For transparency, graduation rates for each of the nine metrics are reported separately. The student success indicator is calculated by dividing the number of students who have met at least one of the nine metrics by the number of students in the grade 12 cohort.<sup>83</sup>

South Carolina is also aiming to reduce the percentage of students who need to take remedial courses at the college level by 5% per year by analyzing and reporting the percentage of high school graduates enrolled as college freshmen in credit-bearing courses.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, the state developed the “Profile of the South Carolina Graduate,” which includes life, academic, and career skills—such as knowing how to learn, collaboration and teamwork, and critical thinking and problem solving—that students should have before they graduate. South Carolina’s goal is to have, by 2035, 90% of its students graduate with these skills.<sup>85</sup>

South Carolina is also aiming to reduce the percentage of students who need to take remedial courses at the college level by 5% per year by analyzing and reporting the percentage of high school graduates enrolled as college freshmen in credit-bearing courses.

## Policy Considerations for Implementation

States and districts can expand college and career readiness by:

- Facilitating access to high-quality materials, aligning curricula across grade levels, and providing professional development for teachers so they can support college- and career-ready courses of study.<sup>86</sup> Professional development can also help teachers design and use performance assessments, including projects, portfolios, and extended-performance tasks, that are encouraged under ESSA and allow students to apply what they are learning to real-world situations.
- Addressing teacher shortages in fields essential to college- and career-ready courses and creating recruitment and retention strategies that ensure all students are taught by a qualified educator. These may take the form of initiatives such as service scholarships and teacher residencies, especially in shortage fields such as mathematics, science, and career-technical education.<sup>87</sup>
- Increasing youth success in college preparatory coursework by offering supports, such as AVID college-readiness programs, that train educators in providing academic and psychological supports to students.<sup>88</sup>

- Increasing support for programs such as Early College or career academy initiatives that promote successful transitions to postsecondary education.<sup>89</sup>
- Establishing sufficient and stable funding streams to promote equitable access to college- and career-ready programs of study. For example, states can increase the proportion of students from low-income families and students of color participating in advanced coursework by ensuring there is no tuition burden or barrier for dually enrolled students, and by paying for textbook and testing fees for AP or IB courses.<sup>90</sup>
- Disaggregating and reporting progress on individual measures within a composite indicator that is based on multiple measures of college and career readiness. This allows districts and schools to know which areas they are succeeding in and in which they have additional work to do. Transparency is also important for equity purposes, so that it is clear which students are getting various opportunities and where there may be a need for proactive measures to close opportunity gaps.
- When calculating college and career readiness outcomes—such as pass rates on AP tests and IB tests, dual-enrollment completion rates, work-based learning opportunities, and industry-recognized credentials—basing the denominator for each measure on all students and not just the students enrolled in these courses to provide a more accurate measure of overall access and success and to incentivize the inclusion of all students.

## Resources on College- and Career-Ready Courses of Study

**Success at Every Step: How 23 Programs Support Youth on the Path to College and Beyond** (American Youth Policy Forum). This report is designed to help policymakers and practitioners learn about effective programs supporting college and career readiness. These programs help diverse youth to improve their academic performance, identify career aspirations, build employer-desired skills, plan for postsecondary education, and develop the personal resources necessary to achieve their goals.<sup>91</sup>

**Building Early College Pathways to STEM Careers** (Jobs for the Future). This brief outlines how school and community leaders in Bridgeport, CT, partnered to prepare students in low-income communities for STEM careers through early college pathways.<sup>92</sup>

**Personal Opportunity Plans** (Engaging Schools). This report describes how Personal Opportunity Plans (POPs) in grades 6–12 can foster students’ college and career development.<sup>93</sup>

**Paper Thin? Why All High School Diplomas Are Not Created Equal** (Alliance for Excellent Education). This brief evaluates how the different types of high school diplomas given out across the country prepare students to be college- and career-ready.<sup>94</sup>

**Preparing 21st Century Citizens: The Role of Work-Based Learning in Linked Learning** (Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education). This brief describes how schools can create work-based education programs that blend real-world problems with the skills and knowledge to succeed in college and the workforce and explains how policymakers can support them.<sup>95</sup>

**Using Dual Enrollment Policy to Improve College & Career Readiness: A Web Tool for Decision Makers** (Jobs for the Future). This brief and web tool analyze dual enrollment policies in all 50 states to determine each state’s progress in creating conditions that support early college strategies for youth from low-income families. It identifies six model policy elements that define a new dual enrollment policy framework.<sup>96</sup>



## Considerations for Using Equity Indicators Well

States may take the following actions to improve the utility of all indicators in their accountability and improvement systems as they implement their ESSA plans:

- Ensure that educators have ongoing access to data in a user-friendly format. Strategic and timely use of data by educators and support staff is critical to identifying children and youth who need intervention and ensuring that they receive the appropriate supports.<sup>97</sup> States may consider using dashboards for many of their indicators to allow for a more comprehensive view of a school's progress and performance across multiple indicators.
- Disaggregate and report the individual measures included within any composite indicator. This allows analysis of performance on the individual measure overall and by student subgroup.
- In addition to school improvement funding and direct student services funding, leverage funding under Title II for professional development and Title IV, Part A of ESSA for student supports to implement evidenced-based strategies and interventions that can improve school performance on each of the indicators for all students.

### Resources for Further Engagement in ESSA

**Engage for Equity: A Toolkit for School Communities on the Every Student Succeeds Act** (The Dignity in Schools Campaign, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and Partners for Each and Every Child). This toolkit has easy-to-follow steps to help parents, families, community members, and students navigate how to engage in decisions that impact their schools during ESSA implementation.<sup>98</sup>

**Decision Guide for Implementing ESSA: State Considerations for Effective Grant Programs** (Council of Chief State School Officers). This guide provides specific information about implementing ESSA's non-accountability requirements and is organized by grant program.<sup>99</sup>

**ESSA Parent Advocacy Toolkit** (Understood and the National Center for Learning Disabilities). This toolkit is designed for parents of the 1 in 5 children with learning and attention issues to support their efforts to increase equity in educational opportunity under ESSA.<sup>100</sup>

## Conclusion

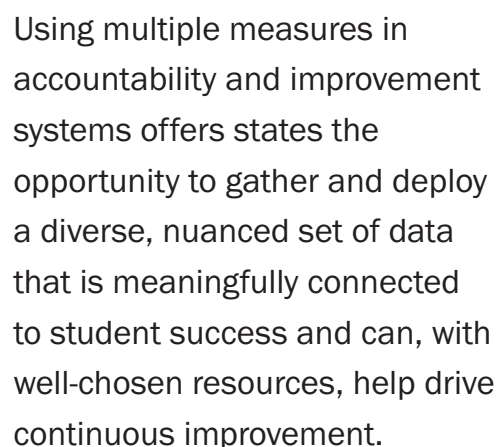
A significant number of parents, educators, and other educational advocates worked intensely for the inclusion of educational opportunity measures in ESSA because they had seen these practices improve student outcomes in states, districts, and schools across the country. Now that states have created their plans, the critical moment to deepen implementation is here. During this stage, states can work together with districts, schools, educators, and community members using information from these five equity indicators as a guide to measure success in increasing students' opportunities to learn.

Using multiple measures in accountability and improvement systems offers states the opportunity to gather and deploy a diverse, nuanced set of data that is meaningfully connected to student success and can, with well-chosen resources, help drive continuous improvement. As states implement ESSA, it is critical that they support districts, schools, and educators in making these data actionable, using information to identify appropriate interventions and support, and enabling educators to learn to implement strategies that lead to student success.

State accountability systems should themselves be a focus of continuous improvement. These systems should not only meet ESSA requirements, but also help initiate productive changes to improve student performance within districts and schools. States and districts should evaluate the outcomes of their efforts and continue to fine-tune both their indicators (so that they are informative and foster positive changes for students) and the improvement strategies (so that they are effective responses to the indicator data).

Just as innovative and effective schools require consistent and informed systems of support with involvement from parents, community leaders, and school-based personnel, successful states and districts require consistent and informed systems of measurement and improvement with continued involvement from the same stakeholders. Policymakers should continue to engage with the full range of education stakeholders to improve their efforts toward ensuring equity in opportunity and outcomes for all students.

ESSA provides states the flexibility to add new measures to their school improvement systems over time; therefore, states should continue to refine their systems as they learn what enables schools and districts to continually expand the opportunities provided to all students.



Using multiple measures in accountability and improvement systems offers states the opportunity to gather and deploy a diverse, nuanced set of data that is meaningfully connected to student success and can, with well-chosen resources, help drive continuous improvement.

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## About the Authors

**Stephen Kostyo** is a Policy Advisor and a member of LPI's Deeper Learning and Policy teams. He previously worked for Congressman Tim Ryan of Ohio, first as a fellow and then as a Legislative Assistant. Prior to that, he was a Presidential Precinct Fellow, providing logistical support for a U.S. government initiative to empower young African leaders. Earlier in his career, Kostyo taught middle school and high school science in Alabama, where he coached baseball and sponsored the science fair program. In 2015, while teaching mathematics at Charlottesville High School, he was voted Teacher of the Year.

**Jessica Cardichon** is Director of Federal Policy and of LPI's Washington, DC, office. She is also a member of the Learning Policy Institute's Educator Quality, Policy, and Deeper Learning teams. Her work focuses on developing federal legislative and regulatory strategy and policy. Previously, she served as Education Counsel to Senator Bernie Sanders, a member of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, and as Senior Director for Federal Policy and Advocacy at the Alliance for Excellent Education. Among her recent publications is *Advancing Equity for Underserved Youth: How New State Accountability Systems Can Support School Inclusion and Student Success*.

**Linda Darling-Hammond** is President of the Learning Policy Institute and Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford University. Her research and policy work focus on educational equity, teaching quality, and school designs that support deeper learning. She has worked with policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels on developing stronger and more equitable systems of education, and she directed President Obama's education policy transition team in 2008. Among her more than 500 publications are the award-winning book *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*. She is also an author of *Equity and ESSA: Leveraging Educational Opportunity Through the Every Student Succeeds Act*; and *Pathways to New Accountability Through the Every Student Succeeds Act*.



1530 Page Mill Road, Suite 200  
Palo Alto, CA 94304  
p: 650.332.9797

1301 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20036  
p: 202.830.0079

@LPI\_Learning | [LearningPolicyInstitute.org](http://LearningPolicyInstitute.org)

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