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# Maximizing Opportunities Under ESSA

**Editors:**

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**Contributing Authors:**

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Paul Hill  
Ashley Jochim



at Edvance Research, Inc.™

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# Introduction: Leveraging the Every Student Succeeds Act for School Improvement

Ashley Jochim and Betheny Gross  
Center on Reinventing Public Education

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The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers states a prime opportunity that should be wisely leveraged. For the first time in more than a decade, Congress has redefined the federal government's role in K–12 education, rolling back some of the more prescriptive elements of No Child Left Behind and handing states increased authority over school accountability and improvement strategies.

This power shift gives state education agencies (SEAs), state boards of education, governors, and state lawmakers the chance to move accountability systems beyond the dominant carrot-and-stick approach of recent years—an approach whose effectiveness many question. States can take advantage of this opening to rethink accountability and school improvement, putting schools and districts on a path to constructive problem solving that leads toward increased effectiveness.

In the sixth and final volume of *The SEA of the Future*, we explore how states can take advantage of this historic moment to: (1) craft accountability systems that can drive continuous improvement systemwide and (2) redefine their role in supporting educators, schools, and districts.

Undergirding this volume's essays are five principles that should guide states' planning and implementation around the newly revamped ESSA. As states revisit their improvement and accountability strategies for K–12 education, they should ensure their plans are:

- 1. Comprehensive.** The plans should go beyond simply identifying how schools and districts are doing to empowering parents and educators to act on data and solve problems. States should articulate clear benchmarks for determining school, district, or program success and identify specific actions to take in cases of ineffectiveness.
- 2. Deliberate about how rich data are used and by whom.** As states shift to using multiple measures of student progress in their accountability systems, they have the chance to prioritize growth in particular areas and share relevant data with parents and educators—without making assessment systems overly complex. States should collect and distribute data that help districts, schools, and teachers do their jobs well; states need not act on all the data they collect.
- 3. Clear in defining nonoverlapping roles and responsibilities for the state and districts.** The state should define the overall accountability system and hold districts responsible for using evidence in pursuit of improvement. If states issue directives, they must also take responsibility for the effectiveness of those actions.



- 4. Nimble enough to allow for triage.** The plans should concentrate attention and resources where schools and districts are persistently struggling. States should focus on developing tailored improvement strategies, rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.
- 5. Focused on fostering continuous improvement systemwide.** With limited resources, state intervention and targeted capacity building is unlikely to be available to most schools and districts. But states can powerfully affect all schools and districts by issuing and waiving regulations, transparently reporting data on K–12 inputs and outcomes, and widely sharing best practices.

In this volume, we consider and expand on these five principles through three essays.

In the first essay, Ashley Jochim reviews ESSA's new opportunities for states to design and use K–12 accountability systems to drive continuous improvement, pursue reform grounded in local priorities and evidence-based best practices, and respond to growing political pressures around student testing.

In the second essay, Paul Hill and Jochim explore how state chiefs can mine ESSA's new opportunities for state leadership on school and district improvement efforts by judiciously wielding a mix of “hard” and “soft” powers. This means forcing the hand of struggling local districts with direct interventions when necessary and influencing local district leaders and others more informally when appropriate.

In the third and final essay, Betheny Gross considers how states can harness ESSA to strengthen their use of evidence-based policymaking. Doing this can help state agencies foster local innovation and cross-state collaboration to develop and share needed solutions to pressing education problems.

Taken together, these three essays provide SEAs a new framework for strategic planning and concrete tools for implementation as they face a landscape that grants states expansive authority over accountability and improvement strategies.

# ESSA's Opportunities for States in Assessment, Accountability, and Turnaround

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Regardless of ideology or political persuasion, most observers agree the federal government's growing influence on education in recent years has resulted in widespread disaffection. Republicans and Democrats alike observe mounting public discontent in states and localities around issues like Common Core State Standards, testing, accountability, and teacher evaluation. Years of congressional inaction to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) strengthened the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to fill the void with stopgap measures, further distancing federal law from state and congressional priorities. The 2015 passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) grew from all these concerns.

Many observers lauded ESSA for returning control over education to the states. *The Wall Street Journal* said the law represents “the largest devolution of federal control to the states in a quarter-century.”<sup>1</sup> Utah Governor Gary Herbert, speaking for the National Governors Association, said the law “is a clear example of cooperative federalism” and gives states and localities the “freedom” they need.<sup>2</sup>

But the devolution narrative fails to capture the reality that states vary tremendously in their capacity to redesign accountability systems, assess new measures of school success, and pursue evidence-based approaches to school turnaround. To fully take advantage of the possibilities ESSA provides, states will need to continue their focus on building internal resources to support system-wide school improvement.

This essay reviews ESSA's flexibilities and constraints and identifies opportunities for state education agencies (SEAs) to advance a new approach to accountability and assessment on behalf of school improvement.

### OPPORTUNITY #1: MOVING TOWARD MORE USEFUL (AND USABLE) ASSESSMENTS

Beginning with the 1994 ESEA reauthorization, federal law has required states to adopt academic standards and assess student progress. But in recent years, controversy has swirled around these efforts. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) required districts to intervene in schools that failed to make “adequate yearly progress,” thereby attaching high stakes to the results of annual assessments. The Obama administration's ESEA flexibility waivers relaxed some of these provisions but triggered other concerns by requiring states to evaluate teachers based on students' standardized test scores. The resulting political fallout has pressured state policymakers to roll back or modify testing requirements.

ESSA maintains the federal commitment to annual standardized tests but grants states new options for assessment design that could make required assessments more useful and usable for parents and teachers. ESSA now permits alternatives such as:

- **Computer adaptive assessments:** [Computer adaptive assessments](#) let students answer questions at an appropriate difficulty level and can improve the precision of testing results.<sup>3</sup> The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, one of two federally funded consortia designing Common Core-aligned tests, took this approach.
- **Broader types of assessments:** States can include more types of assessments in students' achievement indicator, such as [student work portfolios](#) or projects and [extended performance tasks](#), which require students to answer in more open-ended ways or engage in exercises over longer time periods (for example, drafting a memo over several hours).
- **Interim assessments:** States can use multiple interim assessments to calculate students' summative assessment results. These [types of assessments](#) give students, parents, and teachers rapid feedback on student progress at multiple points during the academic year. This enables state achievement tests to function as both a formative assessment (allowing teachers to use them to modify instruction in real time to improve student learning) and as a summative assessment.
- **(Potentially) fewer assessments for high school students:** With SEA approval, districts can use nationally recognized assessments like the SAT for high school students in lieu of other test-based accountability measures. States have an opportunity to lighten the testing load on high school students, many of whom must take Advanced Placement and college-entrance tests on top of required district and state assessments. And states could simultaneously expand access to higher education by having all high school students take college-entrance tests that then can be used for state K–12 assessment purposes.

These options carve a path for states to address parents' concerns with state achievement tests and the overall student testing burden without losing the value of annual testing. But states face technical, economic, and substantive challenges in making assessment systems more streamlined, responsive, and useful.

- **Technical:** If used for federal accountability purposes, innovative assessments must be shown to be valid (i.e., aligned with state standards) and reliable (i.e., generate predictable, consistent, and fair results).

Previous efforts to use innovative assessment systems, including in Vermont and Kentucky in the 1990s, floundered because evaluators found the systems failed to reliably measure school quality.<sup>4</sup>

- **Economic:** Traditional standardized tests became popular in large part because they offered a cost-effective solution to the challenge of assessing student learning over time and across localities. Innovative assessment systems, especially those requiring human scoring, will likely cost more.
- **Substantive:** State assessment systems serve many masters: they aim to inform parents and the public about public school system performance, help teachers improve their practice and identify students at risk, and hold schools and districts accountable for improvement. Few assessment systems are able to address all of these ends simultaneously.

Ultimately, state legislators will wind up shaping which assessment options end up on the table for any given state. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, state lawmakers introduced some 500 assessment-related bills in the legislative session immediately following ESSA's passage.

SEAs will play a key role in educating state policymakers about assessment options and how states can best harness ESSA's flexibility to design improved systems. Lawmakers are not assessment design and implementation experts; their job is to translate constituent concerns into policy. SEAs can support improved assessment systems by deepening their relationships with legislators and their staff and identifying and communicating the advantages and disadvantages of different assessment approaches.<sup>5</sup>

## OPPORTUNITY #2: CREATING A NEW AND IMPROVED ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

Accountability systems are the glue that connect state standards to school practices. What states choose to measure will likely compel changes in the behavior of districts, schools, teachers, and even parents.

NCLB spurred substantial changes to state accountability systems. But the law's accountability requirements had unintended consequences. The exclusive reliance on standardized test scores to judge school quality led many schools to narrow their offerings and concentrate efforts on tested subjects and grades.

ESSA explicitly seeks to address what was maligned with NCLB accountability systems. Like NCLB, ESSA requires states to track student achievement across student subgroups and publicly report the results. But the law significantly broadens the set of indicators that states must include. All states will now be required to include five measures in their accountability system:

1. Proficiency on annual assessments.
2. A second measure of academic achievement for elementary and middle schools that allows for meaningful differentiation in school performance (e.g., student growth).
3. Graduation rates for high schools.
4. Progress of English language learners toward English language proficiency.
5. Another indicator of school quality or student success (e.g., access to rigorous coursework, school climate, or socio-emotional learning) that can be disaggregated by student subgroup.

While ED regulations will likely curb state flexibility around metrics design, the expansion of mandatory indicators will require many states to broaden their set of accountability measures. This presents both opportunities and risks. On the opportunity side, states can work to tailor their accountability system toward local priorities; on the risk side, not all states are equally well equipped with the assessment expertise required to design or select new, often novel, student outcomes measures.

ESSA continues to require states to measure students' proficiency on annual assessments. But the ED may give states the option to abandon tracking of proficiency rates; this tracking creates perverse incentives to focus on students near the cusp of proficiency, often at the cost of students well above or below the benchmark. Morgan Polikoff, assistant professor of education at the University of Southern California, has offered two alternatives to measuring proficiency in a letter to the ED.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of where the ED lands on the regulations, SEAs could seek waivers to use alternative proficiency measures.

In the meantime, while many observers point to the law's inclusion of student growth measures as significant, this reflects an already well-established state trend. The Center for American Progress reports that 46 states already include a measure of student growth in their accountability system.<sup>7</sup> These measures are likely to continue to evolve as states fine-tune their systems. Perhaps this arena's most powerful development is the chance to measure growth across the achievement spectrum (i.e., both high and low achievers), incentivizing schools to better serve students who already meet proficiency benchmarks or students who are struggling the most to get there.<sup>8</sup>

The fourth and fifth indicators are likely to spur the most substantial changes in state accountability systems. While NCLB required states to measure English language learners' progress toward English language proficiency, states weren't required to disaggregate data by school and tracking was divorced from states' traditional accountability systems. As a result, just six states currently use a

measure of English language proficiency in their accountability system in any way. By moving English language proficiency into their accountability systems, states will shine a new light on these students' progress.

The new law also lets states experiment with more nuanced methods of assessing school quality. Before ESSA, states varied tremendously in whether they included non-achievement-based measures of school success in their accountability systems. Some states tracked school climate or access to coursework but few disaggregated those data by student subgroup. By letting states use alternative measures of school quality, ESSA may address some of NCLB's more undesirable accountability impacts, including a narrowing of the curriculum and an expansion of time and focus on test preparation. Under ESSA, states could opt to measure students' participation in arts, music, and physical education and thereby incentivize schools and districts to provide a more well-rounded curriculum.

Of course, the devil is in the details. The design and use of new measures requires investments in SEA capacity to use research, draw on experts, and reach out to district officials, unions, parents, school boards, and others who would use the new measures and/or be held accountable for results. SEAs that lack these capacities are likely to turn to metrics that largely mirror those in the existing accountability system. Alternatively, states may use measures that lack an evidence base and ultimately find themselves with a system that fails to reliably assess outcomes. The latter is a particular risk with the fifth indicator, which state accountability systems have not historically included and for which experts warn that assessment development is still in its nascency.

States are likely to face trade-offs between creating clear and simple accountability metrics and providing more multifaceted portraits of school quality. While draft ED regulations suggest that summative scores will be required in any retooled state accountability system, states will need to decide how they integrate those scores into accountability dashboards and school report cards. How these indicators are displayed and used to inform decision making will ultimately be more consequential than whether states calculate summative scores at all.

### OPPORTUNITY #3: CRAFTING A SMARTER APPROACH TO SCHOOL TURNAROUND

NCLB was widely criticized for inaccurately deeming a large number of schools "in need of improvement" and for prescribing how districts and states must intervene when schools failed to meet targets. ESSA explicitly addresses much of what critics found wrong with NCLB's approach to school turnaround. States can now define improvement targets for all schools and student subgroups,

rather than having the federal government tell them to use an arbitrary, uniform set of goals. ESSA requires states to identify the lowest-performing schools but grants states more flexibility in how states weight the five indicators, which gives states the chance to align their accountability systems with specific priorities.<sup>9</sup> And it abandons prescribed turnaround methods, favoring locally prioritized, evidence-based approaches instead.

The expanded flexibility empowers states to take a much more thoughtful approach to identifying and supporting schools in need of improvement.

- States could choose to differentiate schools based on a weighting scheme tied to state priorities, like encouraging schools to improve non-achievement-based measures of school quality or to boost achievement of English language learners. While ED draft regulations curb how states weight the indicators and identify schools, states still have significant latitude to customize their approach based on their identified problems and priorities.
- States will be better positioned to take advantage of local expertise in school turnaround work. The law continues support for school-improvement efforts by reserving 7 percent of states' Title I allocation for this purpose. But states have new freedom in how they support local districts with these funds. States can distribute these funds on a competitive or a formulaic basis; a competitive approach would let states capitalize on local work already underway and reward districts with the best proposals.
- SEAs have important opportunities (and responsibilities) to ensure that districts and schools pursue evidence-based approaches to improvement since ESSA requires states to monitor districts' school improvement plans for this.

These state roles, however, are not without challenges. Schools and districts vary significantly in how equipped they are to implement a given evidence-based turnaround strategy. Identifying whether a particular strategy will be effective in a given context takes more than simply checking evidence boxes on a form, as the law requires. It requires understanding the local schools' operating conditions and whether existing leadership and available resources are sufficient to put effective strategies into practice.

While the law's increased flexibility gives states ample opportunity to tailor their approach to school improvement, this also introduces risk. States may forgo the chance to develop local solutions to performance gaps and choose instead to do nothing. Or states could act aggressively and impose their own one-size-fits-all solutions that are just as removed from school-level realities as the old federally prescribed turnaround strategies, thereby spurring backlash.

While federal education policy debates often focus on the plight of schools serving large numbers of low-income students, ESSA could increase policymakers' attention toward schools with fewer disadvantaged students. The law requires states to identify schools in need of improvement where "any subgroup of students is consistently underperforming." This may result in identifying schools with deep achievement gaps within otherwise strong performance overall. States' new identification process for schools needing improvement may push more districts to acknowledge achievement gaps and do more to address struggling students' needs. While the NCLB corrective action provision grew to include a broader array of schools over time, the law's prescriptive turnaround strategies helped fuel community backlash. In contrast, ESSA lets districts take the lead on identifying improvement strategies, which may help mitigate potential political opposition. Finally, for the first time, federal law will require documentation of resource inequities within districts, which will empower historically disadvantaged groups with data that may help them push for changes in school- or district-level practices.

### CONCLUSION: HOW STATES CAN MAKE THE MOST OF ESSA'S OPPORTUNITIES

ESSA grants states and localities substantial new latitude to pursue reform grounded in local priorities and evidence-based best practices. Gone are many of the prescriptive elements of NCLB and the Obama administration's flexibility waivers.

Requirements for multiple accountability measures and more customized interventions in low-performing schools are likely to spur changes to K–12 education and its politics. How ESSA shapes education policy going forward will largely depend on how—and how much—states take advantage of their newfound flexibility. ESSA may be an instance of the dog catching the car: states wanted more flexibility. Now that they have it, the burden falls on them to define their K–12 education priorities and act on them.

If recent history is any measure, state action to exploit the newfound latitude is not a given. The Obama administration gave states the option to use multiple measures in their accountability systems through its waiver program, but just 18 states did so.<sup>10</sup> We know states often fail to take full advantage of the power they already have to improve conditions for schools and districts. Providing flexibility creates a window of opportunity, but it does not guarantee that states will open that window.



To fully maximize ESSA's possibilities, state policymakers and chiefs must double down on enhancing capacity in SEAs, which will lead much of the tough work to craft new accountability systems and oversee school and district improvement efforts.

As states capitalize on their new flexibility to craft a different approach to K–12 improvement, they should take stock of the lessons learned from the last decade of school reform. The federal government's efforts to improve public schools have always been limited by the fact that the feds do not (and cannot) directly control the individuals whose behavior they seek to influence. States are often no better positioned. They can provide data, flexibility, and the ownership over student results that encourages local educators to improve. But the success of state efforts ultimately depends on the cooperation of teachers, principals, administrators, families, and others. This means states must work closely with local school systems to find and support solutions that make sense to the communities they aim to help.

## ENDNOTES

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3. The impact of computer adaptive testing is an evolving area of research. See G. Gage Kingsbury, Edward H. Freeman, and Mike Nesterak, "The Potential of Adaptive Assessment," *Educational Leadership* 71, no. 6 (March 2014). Some studies document increased precision, but others suggest that this type of assessment can increase test anxiety, thereby undermining validity for certain students. See Nicole Makas Colwell, "Test Anxiety, Computer Adaptive Testing, and the Common Core," *Journal of Education and Training Studies* 1, no. 2 (2013): 50–60.
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6. Morgan Polikoff, "A letter to the U.S. Department of Education," *On Education Research* (personal blog), July 12, 2016, accessed October 20, 2016.
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9. The law requires states to identify (a) the lowest 5 percent of schools statewide based on the five indicators, (b) high schools with graduation rates below 67 percent, and (c) schools with consistently underperforming subgroups. Each of the required indicators must carry "substantial" weight, and the academic indicators must be given a weight "much greater" than either the school quality or student success indicator. See Andrew Ujifusa and Alyson Klein, "Your Cheat Sheet for the Proposed ESSA Accountability Rules," *Politics K–12* (blog), *Education Week*, June 7, 2016.
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# “Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick”: Why Chiefs Should Do Both to Improve Schools and Districts

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Center on Reinventing Public Education

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With enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), responsibility for improving student outcomes is back where some say it has always belonged—under state purview. While the law’s regulations and U.S. Department of Education interpretation will likely continue the federal government’s tendency to circumscribe what states can do, on the whole, states will gain much more freedom in how they identify, support, and turn around low-performing schools.

Much of this work will fall upon state superintendents (“chiefs”). Happily, many chiefs are better prepared than ever to foster change on behalf of at-risk students. The build-up of chiefs’ leadership capacity started well before it became clear that ESSA would grant states substantial flexibility: over the past decade, two developments have broadened states’ options for effective action.

**Development #1:** Chiefs now possess an expanded tool set for improving local schools and districts. These tools give chiefs new “hard powers”—formal authority to direct school and district transformation, from providing formalized supports to struggling local systems to assuming management via state-run districts, receiverships, chartering, or wholesale district takeovers. Chiefs are using combinations of local school and district capacity, external support providers, and nonprofit school operators to develop more effective and politically sustainable improvement strategies.

**Development #2:** Chiefs have established a pattern of activism, evident in many if not all states, that leverages their “soft powers,” or more informal means of influence. These powers include persuading others to do things on their own initiative, whether or not the chief has the power to compel the action. Chiefs are using their bully pulpit (buttressed by their expanded hard powers) to build coalitions to solve neglected problems in key localities, support local leaders who take initiative, and help those leaders take advantage of all the freedoms state law permits.

While some may consider chiefs’ hard and soft powers as alternatives, in reality they are mutually reinforcing. Together, they can help chiefs influence far more localities and find more effective ways to help disadvantaged students than either strategy used alone.

## Key Takeaways

- More chiefs are gaining “hard powers” to intervene and support local school improvement—with growing examples of effectiveness.
- Interventions leading to state control carry strict practical and political limits.
- Chiefs can use “soft powers” to define issues, support local reformers, and support well-founded local requests for regulatory and spending flexibility.
- Hard and soft powers are mutually reinforcing: to maximize their effectiveness on behalf of school improvement, chiefs need to use both.

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## FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY PUSHED AND PULLED CHIEFS IN NEW DIRECTIONS

States are constitutionally responsible for public education, but have long delegated their educational responsibilities to local school boards. Until the 1970s, funding and provision of public schools was mostly a local enterprise, and state education agencies (SEAs) had little direct control or administrative capacity.

Changes in state and federal policy have led SEAs and their leaders to assume new responsibilities. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 made SEAs into administrators of new federal programs like Title I. Chiefs used the flow of federal resources to staff their agencies and ensure that districts complied with federal program rules. Later, in the 1980s, state legislatures, governors, and the courts sought to improve local public school quality by bringing more coherence and uniformity to K–12 public education. SEA leaders became responsible for improving the quality of schooling inputs (e.g., time, money, and staff), usually by structuring state law and policy around teacher preparation, curriculum, and funding. Most recently, federal law has required states to establish goals for student achievement and to track local progress.

These reforms reshaped the role of state chief. Chiefs were now expected to be effective administrators who efficiently managed compliance responsibilities, expert educators capable of identifying effective practices for instruction and school organization, and public accountability officials charged with tracking and reporting on school performance.

Federal initiatives after the Great Recession of the late 2000s further expanded chiefs’ leadership capacity, particularly in states that competed for Race to the Top grants. To compete, chiefs had to become advocates for state legislative and policy changes on testing, accountability, charter schools, and educator evaluation. In the winning states, chiefs and state boards of education were responsible for delivering on promises made to get the federal money. This forced many chiefs to proactively work with their legislatures and, in turn, put new pressures on SEA staff, districts, schools, and teachers. The Obama administration’s offer of state waivers from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements further strengthened chiefs’ role in brokering state policy changes and ensuring that the state and its localities kept their pledges. These interactions with the federal government and among state and local policymakers gave many chiefs standing to press for reforms in ways that previously would have been considered beyond their powers.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of these successive waves of reform, an increasing number of chiefs have broken out of their traditional roles and taken a more activist position in K–12 education. In doing so, they have relied on both “hard power”—formal authority to intervene and direct local improvement efforts—and “soft power”—more informal means of persuasion where a chief may not have the authority to force action. Below, we describe how these powers have evolved and how chiefs have used them in tandem, rather than as either-or options, to support local improvement efforts.

## CHIEFS GAIN “HARD POWER” THROUGH NEW AUTHORITIES

Since the 1970s, chiefs have gained new authority to shape what educators do and how schools operate by adopting curriculum, standards, and assessment; regulating teacher certification; and ensuring compliance with federal program rules. But none of these powers enabled chiefs (or their delegates) to directly improve school administration or instruction.

The emergence of state-initiated school turnaround as a reform strategy, however, has greatly enhanced chiefs’ power. State-initiated turnaround is among the strongest hard power tools chiefs can wield to influence local improvement. By definition, state-initiated turnarounds involve an element of coercion: they force changes that a locality may have been unwilling or unable to embrace on its own. Unlike efforts to improve local public schools via regulations, state-initiated turnarounds aim to directly change administrative and instructional practices.

The tradition of local control in public education means that state intrusion in local school administration is often a political, conflict-ridden enterprise. But local school boards sometimes fail to deliver on the promise of a quality education for all. They can become embroiled in conflict, neglect groups of children, or spend the district into bankruptcy. When these things happen, state chiefs need the authority to force a new start.

New Jersey was the first state to take over a district, in 1989 in Jersey City. Many states followed suit. By 2016, a total of 35 states had laws that enabled them to take over management of schools and/or districts. NCLB reinforced the turnaround trend by requiring states to oversee and support school improvement efforts.

While the federal law established a floor for state oversight of low-performing schools and districts, it is *state* policy that more precisely determines the latitude or constraint on a chief’s action in the face of chronic performance problems.

On one end of the state-initiated turnaround spectrum, some states require SEAs to provide struggling local schools and districts with support, either directly or through a partner. For example, California, until recently, required schools to work with a school assistance intervention team for three years or enter into a joint intervention agreement with the state. Other states, like Minnesota, delegate support functions to regional entities. These support models rely on state-local cooperation and assume that local education leaders have the will, authority, and capacity to change practices.

On the other end of the state-initiated turnaround spectrum, some states authorize chiefs to assume management of low-performing schools or districts via state-run districts, receiverships, chartering, or wholesale district takeovers. These models can let states directly address gaps in local capacity and facilitate execution of a turnaround plan by insulating the resulting school changes from local politics. Such models also can test the limits of SEAs’ capacity and chiefs’ political skills.

Recent innovations in turnaround policy have better equipped states to support local improvement efforts by mitigating a wide range of state and local operational and political constraints. For instance, state-managed districts, like the Louisiana Recovery School District, are independent statewide entities that direct turnarounds in individual schools, not whole districts. This lets states focus on fewer struggling schools within one or more districts. The state can expand learning time, change personnel, and contract with school operators without having to negotiate with district staff, unions, and the local board.



Some chiefs also leverage the state agency’s charter school authorizing powers to reconstitute low-performing schools as charter schools, which are independent from the local district and free to construct novel approaches to school improvement in exchange for being held accountable for student results. Executed well, these strategies let chiefs tackle performance gaps through partnerships with proven nonprofit school operators and scale turnaround efforts slowly as new school talent is identified (principals and charter operators skilled in turnaround are in short supply). But precisely because these approaches sidestep the local district and local political process, they can be contentious and test chiefs’ fortitude.

Some states have sought to build stronger roles for localities in state-initiated turnarounds through state-authorized turnaround zones, which typically include a subset of a local district’s schools. Through law or regulation, states can create a new policy framework for turnaround zone schools, giving those principals more autonomy and funding and waiving key provisions of collective bargaining agreements or district policy. Memphis Public Schools’ iZone and the Springfield Empowerment Zone in Massachusetts are two such examples.

All these turnaround options vary in how much power they provide chiefs to change local schools. While state-initiated turnaround mechanisms have diversified and states have gained increased authority to direct local public schools’ operations through full-fledged takeovers, none of the current approaches outlined here offer chiefs a sure win. Evidence on the effectiveness of state-initiated turnarounds of all types is mixed. And many interventions have never been evaluated to assess their impacts.<sup>2</sup>

These mixed results may be partly explained by the substantial variation in *how* state interventions change the operation of local public schools, including factors like whether the state is able to get talent into the schools, marshal additional resources to support the turnaround, and get local administrators and parents to embrace the effort. State interventions that fail to address local gaps in capacity, improve operating conditions for teachers and principals, or build broad support are less likely to be successful. States are not equally well positioned to address these challenges. And many chiefs are hamstrung by inadequate staffing and weak political support.

While state interventions are often seen as a measure of last resort, chiefs have significant freedom to choose whether or when to use their hard power to intervene—and whether or when to use the threat of intervention to motivate negotiation and consensus building around school improvement in local communities. The latter is an important lever that can affect far more localities than state chiefs could directly intervene in.

## CHIEFS GAIN “SOFT POWER” THROUGH INFORMAL MEANS OF INFLUENCE

Unlike the more direct control embedded in hard power, when chiefs wield soft power they influence, persuade, and incentivize others to act on behalf of school improvement. In its crudest form, soft power depends on hard power—like when chiefs threaten state or court intervention to motivate local actors to address neglected problems in their schools. But soft power includes much more than that. Chiefs can use their bully pulpit, making speeches and issuing reports that draw public attention to a local problem. Chiefs can lend their support and prestige to others by convening task forces, bestowing awards, and publicly praising local officials who take initiative to improve their schools. And chiefs can link local officials with other state-level help, including the governor, the legislature, or state agencies (this strategy can bolster chiefs’ political capital in the process). All these actions can make state and local officials into collaborators, not just compliers.

Chiefs’ use of soft power can embolden local officials who have long wanted to act but could not assemble enough support. When chiefs shine a spotlight on local performance gaps and opportunities to improve, they can spur local problem solving. And as chiefs across the country have moved beyond their compliance responsibilities, they have capitalized on new openings to influence others on the sidelines (e.g., mayors and civic leaders who previously paid little attention to K–12 issues).

Clearly, soft power alone is not always enough for chiefs hoping to improve districts and schools. But it can help chiefs extend their reach much farther than relying on hard power alone. For example, when chiefs exercise soft power in one community, it can have a domino effect on others, influencing actors in places where chiefs have not focused their efforts. In Louisiana, for example, the state’s work in New Orleans through the Recovery School District helped to catalyze improvement efforts in Jefferson Parish even though the district had not (yet) been a target of state-initiated turnaround.

The exercise of soft power focuses a chief’s attention on moves that local actors can make. Chiefs needn’t develop the local improvement plans themselves, but they do need to draw the right players into the conversation and ensure they are motivated—both by a full understanding of the locality’s problems and by the prospect of state intervention if nothing is done to resolve them—to seek strong remedies. Chiefs can also facilitate implementation of local plans, brokering necessary waivers of state regulatory and funding limits.

This form of soft power activism is new for chiefs in two ways. First, it focuses on improving particular localities and schools, rather than on setting school-improvement policy for the state as a whole. Second, it makes the chief a power broker, coalition builder, and resource seeker, not just an official performing legally prescribed duties. Examples of chiefs wielding soft power to influence local actors include:

- Visiting communities to get diverse coalitions of government and private-sector actors to recognize a problem and develop a collaborative strategy to solve it.
- Urging local boards and superintendents to consider actions previously thought outside their powers and contrary to state policy, and ensuring that the SEA construes their actions as permissible.
- Mediating local disputes like those between a superintendent and school board members, the board and the teachers union, or a state representative and the district.
- Helping local board members identify new district leadership pipelines, including assisting in searches for superintendents who will implement a strong improvement strategy.
- Convening superintendents or board members across communities to tackle common problems and committing state support for promising lines of action.
- Offering local (and potential) superintendents training on building coalitions to break political logjams and using data to garner support for bold actions.
- Ensuring that promising local initiatives are validly evaluated, program design and implementation plans are thoughtfully drawn, and results are broadly shared.<sup>3</sup>

A chief can exercise soft power even with no state takeover law on the books. Chiefs interviewed for our study reported running interference for local boards and superintendents with the SEA bureaucracy and seeking technical amendments to state laws that had unintended consequences for particular districts. By doing this, chiefs encouraged local initiative and quelled local school systems’ common fear that any outside-the-box action will spell trouble with the state.

While chiefs have taken similar steps in the past, they are increasingly common today. Moreover, a growing number of state chiefs now see such soft power actions as critical tools for bringing about the greatest change.

## A BALANCING ACT FOR CHIEFS TO JUGGLE SOFT AND HARD POWERS

As a practical matter, no agency can act in every situation where its powers apply. Agencies are compelled to act sparingly, focusing on egregious cases where their hand is forced or on other select situations that can generate broad impact by example. The entities overseen, whether banks or school districts, need only believe that the agency *might* act, not that it certainly will.

Given these realities, chiefs have the best shot at maximizing their impact on school and district improvement when they exercise their hard and soft powers in tandem.

A credible threat of state intervention may push local superintendents to undertake their own improvement efforts and strengthen their hand in bargaining over improvement plans with school board members, unions, and others. Chiefs can use soft powers—like identifying pressing local problems and convening local leaders—to then support local actions meant to preempt the state’s use of hard power.

While some states grant chiefs few explicit hard powers, and in some states common state levers like certification denial to nonperforming districts have never been pulled, chiefs determined to act on behalf of students stranded in ineffective schools or negligent districts can still wield soft powers like their bully pulpit. Publicly stating that local action has put a given group of students at risk and that these students need better options is itself a powerful intervention, even if the chief cannot impose particular remedies.

Chiefs must carefully judge when to use hard and soft power. Chiefs who pledge to never use their hard powers may undermine their chances to influence localities informally with soft powers. A chief wanting to maximize soft power would never say, as observed in one city, “No matter what happens, I won’t take over the schools here.”<sup>4</sup> Premature withdrawal is likely to take pressure off of the local superintendent and denies political cover to local leaders who want to argue for bold action.

Do chiefs need to use each of their hard powers at least once to make them credible? There is not yet enough evidence to answer. It seems likely that one exercise of a hard power—say, intervening in a handful of low-performing schools—would be enough to establish the implied threat of using other powers, at least for a while.

On the flip side, chiefs can undermine all their powers, hard and soft, by overusing their intervention authority. Chiefs can only take on so much before exhausting both their focus and the supply of quality school providers and leaders. Once it is clear that a chief is bogged down in a few localities, opportunities to use soft

power elsewhere will likely disappear. Similarly, chiefs who use hard power in many localities can draw significant political backlash and give enemies in the legislature or on the state board cause to unite against them.

## CONCLUSION: LOOKING AHEAD, CHIEFS’ TRAINING AND SKILLS ARE KEY

Thirty-five states have laws allowing some form of school or district takeover. But all state chiefs have inherent power and prestige that allow them to build coalitions and press for action. Chiefs’ strategic use of hard and soft power can boost their role in school-improvement efforts statewide, and a growing number of chiefs are drawing upon both sources of power to maximize their impact.

Will more chiefs come to use their hard and soft powers as they mine ESSA’s new opportunities for state leadership on school improvement? Much will depend on states’ political climates and how willing governors and other senior state officeholders are to prioritize school improvement and back up an activist chief. It will also depend on whether increased turnover of chiefs undermines their ability to wield their hard and soft powers, whose effectiveness depends on carefully nurtured relationships between chiefs, local officials, and state policymakers. With chiefs’ average tenure lasting just a few years, most chiefs will leave office before building the necessary relationships and capacity to be effective in their position.

Ultimately, it comes down to the chiefs themselves: do they have the political skill to navigate state policymaking circles, build coalitions, and gain local superintendents’ and other officials’ respect and attention?

None of the above is a given. While chiefs are better positioned today than ever before to take effective action, many step into the job with little experience in the varied roles the job demands. And while district superintendents typically build their skills while rising through the local school system ranks, the standard pipeline for state superintendents generally fails to prepare them to take on the complex leadership functions involved in driving school improvement.

But new and aspiring chiefs can be better trained to use their powers for school and district improvement. Today, while lawyers, business school graduates, and union leaders are trained in negotiating and coalition building, chiefs typically are not. Training and job-shadowing programs, some of which are being developed by the two national chiefs’ associations, are promising. Aspiring chiefs might also consider taking negotiation courses from business schools or innovative education leadership programs, like Rice University’s Education Entrepreneurship Program. To fully exploit ESSA’s expanded possibilities for state leadership on school and district improvement, chiefs need a wide range of skills for effectively wielding their hard and soft powers on behalf of students.

## ENDNOTES

1. These Obama administration programs also fueled the political fire underlying chiefs’ work on issues like Common Core and teacher evaluation and may be partly responsible for the last decade’s increased turnover among state chiefs.
2. For a comprehensive review of alternative strategies to state-initiated turnaround and their effects, see Ashley Jochim, *Measures of Last Resort: Assessing Strategies for State-Initiated Turnaround* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).
3. Paul Hill, *Chiefs Can Be Powerful* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, forthcoming).
4. Former state superintendent, personal communication, January 2016.

# What Works? Evidence-Based Policymaking Under ESSA

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In the perpetual balancing act between federal, state, and local control over education, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) clearly grants states more power over key issues like accountability and school improvement. But potentially equally significant for states is the opportunity the new law offers state education agencies (SEAs) to strengthen their evidence-based policymaking and practices without stifling innovation. The law does this by emphasizing the use of evidence-based policies and practices throughout and defining evidence in a way that encourages a continuous search for what works.<sup>1</sup> SEAs can capitalize on this chance by taking some key steps, outlined here, to establish their capacity for and commitment to evidence-based policymaking and continuous improvement.

ESSA urges evidence-based policy, but with a more innovation-friendly vision of evidence. Martin West, among others, recently noted that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) too narrowly—and unrealistically—defined the standard of “scientifically based research” in an effort to limit the use of federal funds toward activities with statistically proven results. By contrast, ESSA maintains a clear commitment to evidence-based policy and practice but encourages state and district leaders to consider multiple levels of evidence and examine the strength of the evidence in making policy and program decisions.<sup>2</sup>

This represents a potentially important shift in what is deemed an evidence-based intervention—a shift that could free states to try new ideas in areas like school improvement or testing while still expecting SEAs to ground their efforts in a theory of action and successful outcomes from similar prior initiatives.

Specifically, the 2015 law defines four levels of evidence as part of an evidence-based approach:

1. **“Strong” evidence**—Evidence that lends itself to causal claims about a program’s impact on specific outcomes based on experimental designs that involve randomly assigned treatments and a clear control group.
2. **“Moderate” evidence**—Evidence based on quasi-experimental designs, which try to mimic experimental conditions through statistical controls, such as when lotteries determine entry into treatments (like a charter school) or when arbitrary lines (e.g., district or school geographic boundaries) determine different treatment for otherwise similar groups.
3. **“Promising” evidence**—Evidence based on correlational studies, which examines the relationship between a policy/program and outcomes of interest while controlling for variables that may influence the results.
4. **“Research-based rationale”**—Policies or programs that are judged likely to improve student outcomes or other relevant outcomes, based on prior evidence, but that are still in an exploratory or experimental state.

When using federal school improvement funding, acceptable improvement strategies must meet the strong, moderate, or promising evidence standard. For other “allowable” but not required activities, or competitive funding, the law is more permissive, allowing states to use federal funding on interventions that meet any of the four categories of evidence.<sup>3</sup>

ESSA maintains a strong federal commitment to evidence-based policymaking. At the same time, the law reflects an acknowledgment that we still have much to learn about what works to improve schools, that what works today may be replaced by something better tomorrow, and that what works in one context or place may not work in another.

To be sure, states face challenges to fully capitalize on the law’s view of evidence. Shortcomings in the law may also hamper SEAs’ efforts to establish and sustain a comprehensive research and evaluation system. As always with large federal programs, the precise scope of ESSA’s opportunities for states will be greatly shaped by how future regulations and U.S. Department of Education guidance interpret the law’s details.

While taking stock of these challenges, this essay also offers concrete steps state agencies can take to leverage the possibilities embedded in the law. Doing so will help states further their own commitment to continuous improvement and creative problem solving and ultimately help educators and researchers better understand how to most effectively improve our nation’s schools.

## POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS IN THE LAW FOR STATES TO REDOUBLE EFFORTS ON EVIDENCE

While the precise contours of the opportunities that ESSA provides to states have yet to be hashed out in regulations and departmental guidance, observers have raised concerns that the law falls short on providing states with the needed incentives, resources, and direction to commit to becoming systems that routinely build and use evidence in policy and practice. These concerns include that ESSA forces fiscal trade-offs between programs and evaluation, lacks incentives for internal and external research partnerships, and does not sufficiently guide states in how to weigh implementation research and challenges.

### *No Incentives for a Broader Research Agenda*

The law allows states to use federal dollars for evaluation when implementing specific improvement initiatives. But these financial incentives seem likely to create a collection of isolated research and evaluation initiatives versus a more systematic and sustained state research and evaluation infrastructure. Stand-alone evaluations of initiatives are valuable. But SEAs will likely best

benefit from a comprehensive, integrated, and sustainable research program that spans their federally, state-, and locally funded initiatives. This law can support some of that effort, but not all of it.

### *Few Incentives for Sustained Internal or External Research Partnerships*

Embedding research and evaluation in schools and districts and collecting and aggregating results, using frameworks like those built by Stanford University researcher Anthony Bryk and his colleagues<sup>4</sup> and others promoting local inquiry cycles,<sup>5</sup> could dramatically boost the understanding of new practices and how they play out across multiple contexts. ESSA, however, is silent on promoting efforts to systematically build such capacity. And while ESSA encourages states to partner with institutions of higher education for specific programs or initiatives, the law doesn't provide explicit support for building productive long-term research partnerships. Bill Penuel's research shows that such partnerships can help local leaders better understand whether a statistically significant finding is meaningful for their school or district and what a particular study's limitations might mean.<sup>6</sup> In the long run, a strong state infrastructure will be critical to ensure that learning opportunities are not lost as educators across the state try new ideas and adapt others to their local contexts. SEAs will likely need to use nonfederal resources and initiative to build out a complete evidence-based infrastructure.

### *No Clear Emphasis on Weighing Implementation Factors*

Programs or practices that proved effective under the most rigorous experimental conditions often flounder when actually rolled out across diverse districts, schools, and classrooms. It is not enough to select programs that do well in tested conditions; understanding the complexity of implementation is key. Just as evidence of a policy or program's impact on student outcomes should be weighed in any decisions about whether and/or how an intervention is positioned in state policy, so too should evidence on implementation dynamics. But ESSA does not guide states in this direction. Moreover, solid implementation analysis rarely lends itself to the methodologies the law requires under the "strong" or "promising" evidence labels. This may mean crucial implementation information gets left out of discussions on states' most difficult and complicated efforts, such as school turnaround.

## INTERNAL STATE CHALLENGES TO CAPITALIZING ON ESSA'S WIDE-ANGLE VIEW OF EVIDENCE

Beyond the letter of the new law itself, SEAs clearly face several challenges to operating as well-oiled evidence-based systems that can most effectively help local districts and schools. Scarce resources, competing policymaker roles, and the relevance of existing research all factor into the challenges.

### *Constrained Resources*

Despite significant increases in their analytic capacity, state agencies still struggle to free dollars for research and evaluation. Today, SEAs are better equipped than ever to research and be researched. In the wake of NCLB, states dramatically expanded their data infrastructure and bureaucratic units with the capacity to generate student growth measures.<sup>7</sup> These data systems—which often include detailed information on students, teachers, schools, and school systems—provide the specifics needed to analyze the impact of new approaches for teaching, learning, and system design.

But resources for internal research and evaluation capacity have not necessarily kept pace with the investments in data systems. Many SEAs continue to have their budgets dominated by federal and state mandates. And many SEAs still operate with limited personnel to support analysis.<sup>8</sup>

### *Complex and Competing Roles*

Even if state agencies find the resources for research and evaluation, they are still forced to navigate a complex, at times politically charged, education policy environment with leaders whose roles often overlap. At a minimum, each state's education leadership includes the governor's office, the legislature, and the state agency itself. Some states have state school boards in the mix. While we might hope that evidence of effectiveness would protect “what works” from opposition, evidence is not immune to politics. Different agencies and leaders often have competing agendas, which can translate into competing priorities for resources and evaluation. And when a leader or agency invests in a project, evaluations that reveal less-than-stellar results for the project can be received coolly.

### *Mismatched External Research*

Research has a higher profile in education policy and practice discussions today than even just a decade ago. In fact, in a study of state agencies' research use Margaret Goertz and colleagues found that the agency teams in each of the three states they examined routinely sought research to inform school-improvement practices. That said, state agency leaders remarked that

external research from universities and research organizations often misses the mark when it comes to providing timely, relevant, and usable information for policymakers and practitioners.<sup>9</sup>

Tools like the [What Works Clearinghouse](#) have helped improve state access to research.<sup>10</sup> But SEA staff contend that they rarely have the luxury of waiting years for study conclusions to become available, nor do they have the time and expertise to accurately gauge the transferability of studies that narrowly focus on implementation of a policy in a specific context.<sup>11</sup>

## HOW STATES CAN LEVERAGE ESSA'S EVIDENCE FOCUS TO GROW AS EVIDENCE-BASED SYSTEMS

Challenges and limitations aside, a focused state agency can piggyback on the federal government's expanded commitment to and vision of evidence in policymaking to advance the state's own commitment to research. Outlined below are six key steps states can take to manage the challenges noted above and move forward on fostering evidence-based policymaking and practice that supports a system of continuous improvement.

### **1. Build the Mind-Set and the Team in the State Agency**

Creating an evidence-driven agency requires building an organizational culture of evidence as much as it involves building the specific team to do the research and evaluation work. By integrating evidence in the agency's day-to-day work and backing up that commitment with ample resources, leaders make clear that generating and vetting evidence on policy is a state responsibility.

In [our last volume](#) of *The SEA of the Future*, Carrie Conaway described a state agency with a pervasive commitment to evidence in state policymaking. Conaway leads the Massachusetts agency's eight-person Office of Planning and Management, dedicated to overseeing research and evaluation for all aspects of agency work. That office works closely with the state superintendent and their cabinet, taps internal and external resources to support research and evaluation, and collaborates with program staff across the agency to ensure evidence infuses all agency decisions.

With the commitment to evidence in place, building the team to execute on the vision requires that states confront—and attempt to creatively and thoughtfully manage—the fiscal constraints and trade-offs discussed earlier. Tennessee, for example, expressly includes research capacity in federal program activities, as the department's Nathaniel Schwartz explained in our last volume of *The SEA of the Future*:

*One way we have been able to combat [the lack of resources] is to explicitly place our research in service of various federal cost objectives and thus parcel out federal dollars across individual researchers. Each member of our team logs hourly personnel activity reports noting the projects they have worked on and the program link.<sup>12</sup>*

Although ESSA does not require states to set aside federal dollars for evaluation, the law clearly encourages evaluation efforts and federal dollars can be used for such. As indicated earlier, the federal resources may need to be supplemented with other funds to support a comprehensive agenda. But if the agency establishes a deep commitment to evidence, federal aid can provide a valuable building block for a comprehensive research program.

### **2. Engage External Partners**

External research partners can add still more valuable and flexible capacity to the state agency's research team and supplement thin state resources. External researchers can also serve as a useful buffer when the agency reviews controversial policies or popular policies that generate controversial evaluations, as Tennessee's Schwartz wrote:

*Evaluations are judgments of program effectiveness, and therefore have winners and losers. Even the most research-driven organization will struggle at times to come to terms with negative evaluations of popular programs.<sup>13</sup>*

Of course, not all external partners are equally valuable to state agencies. Michigan Department of Education's Venessa Keesler emphasized the importance of structuring the relationship wisely, following some key principles:<sup>14</sup>

- Find partners who are committed to using state data to drive policy.
- Connect external researchers to projects that match their specialization and strengths.
- Be cautious when pursuing multiple-institution partnerships: universities and research agencies have complex bureaucracies of their own, creating possible administrative challenges.
- Get agency buy-in at all levels and try to demonstrate partnership value early on.
- Partner on answerable questions, not broad, unspecific agendas.
- Be honest on the front end with partners about internal SEA dynamics and politics; this can help researchers understand when and where to tread lightly, ideally avoiding data collection or reporting problems.

- Ask for accessible products that clearly articulate the question asked and the answer the research results provide.
- Set clear expectations and guidelines about data use and presentation of results.
- Build SEA staff interest and understanding with exposure to key research conferences, such as the Association for Education Finance and Policy and the American Educational Research Association.

### **3. Establish a Coherent Research and Evaluation Agenda**

A clear agenda provides critical focus to agency work. A state's research agenda should be directly tied to the state's strategic plan but this is difficult to launch right out of the gate. Conaway recommends starting with a single program and building out the agenda from there. SEAs should also detail what the state wants to learn at what points along the way to ensure that states get information at intervals that can feed into pivotal decision points (e.g., when budgets are set, when staff are allocated, or when natural transitions in the academic year occur).

### **4. Leverage Local Learning**

Schools and districts across a state have the capacity to support research and evaluation, but it often remains untapped. While the states that Goertz and colleagues examined routinely sought practitioner input on new policies, strategies, or problems, the research team reported that the states were less likely to use local educators and leaders to generate evidence.<sup>15</sup> States should not miss this valuable opportunity.

Talented educators and leaders constantly tinker with and test new ideas; the state agency is positioned to leverage the learning from such local initiatives. To allow more experimentation in schools and districts, state agencies (and lawmakers, when required) can provide local schools and districts more latitude in key operational and programmatic areas, such as:

- How schools spend money.
- Who is hired to teach, how they are trained, where they are assigned, and how they are paid.
- How student time is structured.
- How courses are defined and organized.
- How students are assessed for progress.



With these flexibilities, school systems can consider a host of novel approaches in teaching, learning, and teacher preparation. ESSA, for its part, encourages SEAs to track and research new approaches in a way that supports both short- and long-term feedback to practitioners.

Maximizing learning from this experimentation requires state agencies' support and coordination. [The Center for American Progress](#) underscored this point in a recent report:

*State education agencies also should provide local education agencies with additional supports so that leaders can use data effectively for school improvement. Midcourse corrections will be necessary as any approach encounters the reality of the varied needs and contexts of schools in need of improvement. Ongoing use of data is critical for making these corrections.<sup>16</sup>*

Local educators and leaders will likely need training on how to design pilot efforts and how to generate, collect, analyze, and interpret evaluation data. Recent contributions from the district [Reform Support Network](#) provide tools for building local evaluation capacity. And the [Mid-Atlantic Regional Education Laboratory](#) is producing guidance to help schools and districts develop and conduct surveys.

Networking across local educators can further amplify learning. The Carnegie Foundation-led “[networked improvement communities](#)” provides a model for coordinating local experimentation and evaluation efforts. The [Student Agency Improvement Community](#) is one such example, bringing together school and district leaders to develop and test strategies around equipping students to persist in the face of rigorous learning challenges. While this effort drew districts and charter networks from across the country, the same principles of collaborative problem solving would apply to more locally organized networks.

The Center for American Progress suggests that the federal Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) or comprehensive centers could also be useful SEA partners in aggregating and disseminating new evidence statewide.

### **5. Work Across States, Not Just Within States**

SEAs are reasserting their leadership in education policy. And ESSA represents a significant shift from federal mandate to state and local autonomy in key areas. Criticism that SEAs are little more than administrators of federal programs is giving way to serious debates about states' differing approaches to transforming school systems.<sup>17</sup> State agencies are leading with innovative approaches to turning around low-performing schools, creating competency-based assessment systems, assessing the effectiveness of teacher-training programs, incorporating the latest technology tools into instructional practice, and many other initiatives.<sup>18</sup>

State agencies tackling common problems have much to gain from working together, as has already happened through the consortia organized around developing common standards and assessments. So far, collaboration that has been focused on research, evaluation, and problem-solving has been less common and generally limited to the federal RELs, which organize states by geography, not (necessarily) by shared interests. This may help explain why Goertz and colleagues found that two of the three states they examined made little use of their REL.<sup>19</sup>

Self-affiliated networks offer states an alternative, allowing states with shared problems to jointly seek and test solutions. For example, the Council of Chief State School Officers recently launched the [Innovation Lab Network](#), a consortium of 11 state agencies focused on spurring system-level change by scaling locally led innovation in teaching and learning within and across states.<sup>20</sup> Among the network initiatives are pilots of new state-level, competency-based assessment.

### **6. Build Evaluation Into Policy and Reevaluate and Revise Regularly**

Building research and evaluation into policy, rather than treating it as a separate exercise, should help states embody the vision of and optimize the benefits of evidence-based policymaking. Done wisely, it lets state agencies put into action the theory of continuous improvement. States should explicitly—and regularly—schedule re-evaluation and revision of all programs, policies, or regulations based on what research and evaluation show. By doing so, states acknowledge that even “proven” policies and programs benefit from tweaking over time.<sup>21</sup> States’ research and evaluation efforts will also likely demonstrate that some policies and practices—even if popular—have limited life spans and should be phased out after their impact fades or new initiatives prove more effective. Making research and evaluation an integral part of states’ evidence-based policymaking has two additional benefits: quelling resource battles between programs and evaluations and reinforcing the state’s evidence-based mind-set. Once evaluation becomes nonnegotiable, it is less vulnerable to showing up on the chopping block at budget time.

## CONCLUSION: SEAS ARE POSITIONED TO BECOME SAVVY PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS OF EVIDENCE

State agencies, and the school systems they work with, have much to gain from becoming more evidence-driven operations. And states are better positioned to lead the way on evidence-based policymaking and practice than ever before.

ESSA layers on opportunities for states to recommit to this approach, setting clear expectations for the use of evidence in making decisions on policies and programs, creating a broader—more reasonable—definition of what kinds of research methods generate legitimate evidence, and granting states opportunities to use federal dollars to conduct needed research and evaluation. All this sets up states to embrace the work of innovation and continuous improvement. While critics<sup>22</sup> worry that the more permissive definition of evidence will translate into SEAs relying too often on the least robust evidence in policymaking, SEAs are better positioned now than ever to become savvy producers and consumers of evidence. The steps outlined in this essay could help SEAs more fully operationalize what it means to be a system built on evidence. If SEAs ultimately put evidence-based policymaking into practice, they will be better set to help their states' schools and school systems deliver on the promise of quality education for all.

## ENDNOTES

1. For a summary of evidence-based provisions in ESSA, see “[Evidence-based policy provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act](#),” Results for America, accessed October 20, 2016.
2. Martin R. West, “[From evidence-based programs to an evidence-based system: Opportunities under the Every Student Succeeds Act](#),” Brookings, February 5, 2016.
3. Results for America provides a graphic illustration of the required evidence by type of program in the document “[The evidence provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#),” accessed October 20, 2016.
4. Anthony S. Bryk, Louis Gomez, Alicia Grunow, and Paul G. LeMahieu, *Learning to Improve: How America’s Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2015).
5. See also The W. Edwards Deming Institute for information on an inquiry cycle referred to as a PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act) cycle.
6. William Penuel, “[What will research use look like under the Every Student Succeeds Act?](#),” National Center for Research in Policy and Practice (blog), December 10, 2015.
7. According to the Data Quality Campaign, by 2014, 46 states had statewide data repositories; two-thirds of these states had student-level data that allowed them to measure student growth over time.
8. Margaret E. Goertz, Carol Barnes, Diane Massell, Ryan Fink, and Anthony Tuf Francis, *State Education Agencies’ Acquisition and Use of Research Knowledge for School Improvement Strategies*, CPRE Research Report #RR-77 (Philadelphia, PA: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, September 2013).
9. Goertz, et al., *State Education Agencies’ Acquisition and Use of Research Knowledge for School Improvement Strategies*, 2013. See also Schwartz, “Making Research Matter for the SEA,” in Gross and Jochim (eds.), *SEA of the Future: Building Agency Capacity for Evidence-Based Policymaking*, The SEA of the Future 5 (San Antonio, TX: Building State Capacity & Productivity Center at Edvance Research, Inc., 2015); and William Penuel and Caitlin Farrell, “[Research-Practice Partnerships Under ESSA: A Learning Agenda for the Coming Decade](#)” (unpublished book chapter, August 11, 2016), Word file.
10. In addition to the [What Works Clearinghouse](#), other aggregation tools include the [Results First Clearinghouse Database](#) and [Best Evidence Encyclopedia](#).
11. See Goertz, et al., *State Education Agencies’ Acquisition and Use of Research Knowledge for School Improvement Strategies*, 2013; Betheny Gross and Ashley Jochim (eds.), *SEA of the Future: Building Agency Capacity for Evidence-Based Policymaking*, The SEA of the Future 5, San Antonio, TX: Building State Capacity & Productivity Center at Edvance Research, Inc., 2015.
12. Schwartz, “Making Research Matter for the SEA,” in Gross and Jochim (eds.), *SEA of the Future: Building Agency Capacity for Evidence-Based Policymaking*, The SEA of the Future 5 (San Antonio, TX: Building State Capacity & Productivity Center at Edvance Research, Inc., 2015), 35.

13. Schwartz, “Making Research Matter for the SEA,” in Gross and Jochim (eds.), *SEA of the Future: Building Agency Capacity for Evidence-Based Policymaking*, The SEA of the Future 5 (San Antonio, TX: Building State Capacity & Productivity Center at Edvance Research, Inc., 2015).
14. Venessa Keesler, “Building Productive Research Partnerships,” in Gross and Jochim (eds.), *SEA of the Future: Building Agency Capacity for Evidence-Based Policymaking*, The SEA of the Future 5 (San Antonio, TX: Building State Capacity & Productivity Center at Edvance Research, Inc., 2015), 40-52.
15. Goertz, et al., *State Education Agencies’ Acquisition and Use of Research Knowledge for School Improvement Strategies*, 2013.
16. Steve Fleischman, Caitlin Scott, and Scott Sargrad, *Better Evidence, Better Choices, Better Schools: State Supports for Evidence-Based School Improvement and the Every Student Succeeds Act* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, August 31, 2016), 18.
17. Nelson Smith, *Redefining the School District in America* (Washington, DC: The Thomas Fordham Foundation, 2010).
18. Betheny Gross and Paul Hill, “The State Role in K-12 Education: From Issuing Mandates to Experimentation,” *Harvard Law and Policy Review* 10, no. 2 (2016): 299–326.
19. Goertz, et al., *State Education Agencies’ Acquisition and Use of Research Knowledge for School Improvement Strategies*, 2013. The recent Center for American Progress report, however, recommends that SEAs mobilize their REL to support at least their own evidence-building initiatives, even if they don’t find strong shared issues with other states in their lab (Fleischman, Scott, and Sargrad, *Better Evidence, Better Choices, Better Schools*, 2016).
20. The Innovation Lab Network has recently collaborated in redesigning accountability systems with the new flexibility available under ESSA. See Andrew Ujifusa, “*States Collaborate in Pursuit of Fresh Accountability Ideas*,” *Education Week*, January 7, 2016.
21. Charles Sabel, “Dewey, Democracy, and Democratic Experimentalism,” *Contemporary Pragmatism* 9, no. 2 (December 2012): 35–55.
22. Robert E. Slavin, “*Evidence and the ESSA*,” *Huffington Post* (blog), December 8, 2015.

## About the *SEA of the Future* Series

*The SEA of the Future* is produced by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), a non-partisan research and policy center at the University of Washington developing system-wide solutions for K–12 public education. Through research, policy analysis, and technical assistance, CRPE focuses on how states can better support school and district improvement.

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*The SEA of the Future* is a product of the **Building State Capacity and Productivity Center (BSCP Center)**, which focuses on helping state education agencies (SEAs) throughout the country, as they adapt to increased demands for greater productivity. As state departments of education are facing the daunting challenge of improving student performance, the BSCP Center provides technical assistance to SEAs that builds their capacity to support local education agencies (LEAs or districts) and schools, and to the other 21 regional comprehensive and national content centers that serve them, by providing high-quality information, tools, and implementation support. The partners in the BSCP Center are Edvance Research, Inc., the Academic Development Institute, and the Edunomics Lab (Georgetown University).

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