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Equity and ESSA: New report describes how states, districts, and schools can use the new law to close the opportunity gap for underserved youth

Report release on December 7 at U.S. Capitol to be followed by December 14 webinar for state policymakers and education stakeholders

WASHINGTON, DC—The reauthorization in December 2015 of the United States’ major federal education law as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes a number of important requirements and opportunities that create new levers for advancing equity in U.S. education. A new report released today by the Learning Policy Institute (LPI), [*Equity and ESSA: Leveraging Educational Opportunity Through the Every Student Succeeds Act*](#), outlines the equity implications of ESSA and discusses ways in which the federal government, states, districts, and schools can promote equity for underserved children and youth.

The report is being released in conjunction with a briefing on Capitol Hill and will be followed on December 14 with a webinar, [*Equity and ESSA: Using ESSA to Advance Educational Opportunity*](#), cohosted by the Alliance for Excellent Education.

The report is intended for use by policymakers, educators, researchers, and advocates to look at provisions in ESSA that can be used to advance equity and excellence for students of color, low-income students, English learners, students with disabilities, and those who are homeless or in foster care.

“No Child Left Behind launched a new expectation for closing achievement gaps. Although its implementation was problematic, it changed the conversation about equity in public education,” said Linda Darling-Hammond, President and CEO of LPI and Professor Emeritus at Stanford University. “ESSA, however, goes further to put in place many of the critical elements that were missing from NCLB—including attention to resource equity and high-quality opportunities to learn—that could make equity aspirations a reality.”

Key Levers of Equity in ESSA

Teaching Higher-Order Skills to All Students

The new law establishes a set of expectations for states to design standards and assessments that develop and measure higher-order thinking skills for children and to provide related resources for

professional learning. This instructional approach has been common in highly resourced schools under NCLB but was less common in under-resourced schools. Critical levers in this arena are:

- Standards and learning goals: The concept of student learning under ESSA is much broader than it was under NCLB. States are expected to adopt challenging academic standards that will serve to guide curriculum and instruction for all students and focus on critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Assessments: ESSA requires states to implement assessments that measure “higher-order thinking skills and understanding,” explicitly allowing the use of “portfolios, projects, or extended-performance tasks,” as well as adaptive assessments, as part of state systems. While not a traditional focus of equity advocates, such performance assessments are critically important in advancing high-quality learning and, under NCLB, were often not prioritized in schools with high populations of underserved students.

Resource Equity

- Qualified teachers: ESSA requires each state to have a plan for providing effective, experienced, and in-field teachers to all students. States must also monitor and address the allocations of inexperienced, out-of-field, or ineffective teachers.
- Ensuring transparency: The law goes even further than its predecessor in ensuring transparency in resource allocation. Among the mechanisms being used: states and districts must now report the per-pupil expenditures of federal, state, and local funds for each school and district, disaggregated by funding source; and local education agencies’ improvement plans must identify resource inequities. Also, unlike NCLB, ESSA requires states essentially to audit resource equity and adequacy for schools identified for assistance and to invest in them if there are shortfalls or inequalities.
- Funding: ESSA upholds the long-standing principle that federal aid to K-12 education should add to, not substitute for, state and local education funding. For the first time, ESSA also incentivizes districts to consider more equitable approaches to funding.

School Climate and Student Inclusion

Under ESSA, states must report on at least one non-academic measure of performance, such as academic growth, school climate, chronic absenteeism, suspension / expulsion rates, or social-emotional learning. States can choose measures known to influence education outcomes as another means to enhance equity.

Evidence-Based Interventions

Under ESSA, states and districts must implement evidence-based interventions in struggling schools. Among the evidence-based, equity-enhancing approaches funded through the law are the following:

- Research-based interventions for struggling schools: For schools that are identified for support, ESSA allows flexibility for schools and districts to implement locally tailored, evidence-based interventions that are well-grounded in research (e.g., high-quality professional development, targeted curriculum investments, community schools that provide wraparound services (see below), and others).
- Community schools: ESSA also signals its support for community school approaches through the Community Support for School Success program. Community school

approaches look at how out-of-school preconditions affect student learning in the classroom and provide wraparound services (food, school supplies, health care, counseling, tutoring, mentoring, etc.)

- Early childhood education: Finally, ESSA also encourages investments in early childhood education, linked by substantial research to success in school and life.

This report can help states develop thoughtful plans that focus on improving educational quality and equity.

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About the Learning Policy Institute

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.