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Contact: Barbara McKenna, 831-588-4309, bmckenna@learningpolicyinstitute.org

How states can foster social-emotional learning under ESSA (and why it matters)

As states develop new accountability and improvement systems under the Every Student Succeeds Act, a new report examines ways that social and emotional learning and school climate can be included.

WASHINGTON, DC— With widespread recognition that social and emotional competencies are critical to student success, policymakers and educators are looking for the best ways to ensure that schools, districts, and states include support for social-emotional learning (SEL) and a positive school climate (which can foster high-quality SEL) in their accountability systems.

A new report, *Encouraging Social-Emotional Learning in the Context of New Accountability*, outlines measures and tools that can generate data to help educators foster social, emotional, and academic learning. The report is being released as states are developing their accountability plans for the Every Student Succeeds Act, many of which include measures of school climate.

“Until recently, social-emotional learning was often placed on the sidelines and seen as a distraction from academics,” said author Hanna Melnick. “But research shows that social-emotional competencies — which enable students to collaborate, problem-solve, adapt, and think in creative ways — are essential for students’ success in college and career.”

“The report outlines the various types of measures and tools that can be used to foster social and emotional learning and describes how the data can be used in an accountability system,” said author Channa Cook-Harvey. “While we conclude that measures of students’ social-emotional learning should not be considered as a stand-alone indicator in federal accountability systems at this time, measures of school climate can provide important insights into how schools are supporting SEL.”

The report is one of a series of reports on accountability LPI has released this year to help states as they develop systems to advance equity and improve outcomes for all students. To see related reports, please [visit this link](#).

Among the key recommendations:

- 1. States should not use measures of students' social and emotional competence for accountability purposes, at least for now. They can, however, support the use of these measures at the local level, to inform teaching, learning, and program investments.** These indicators can provide important information that identify students' strengths and needs as they relate to SEL, which might be reported on an aggregate basis to inform school decisions about programs and supportive strategies. However, most surveys of social-emotional competencies are relatively new, were not designed for cross-school comparison, and may be particularly vulnerable to reference bias, as students are not always the best judges of their own level of competence. The authors therefore conclude that these measures are not currently appropriate for state accountability systems.
- 2. States could consider including measures of school climate, supports for social-emotional learning, and related outcomes in their accountability and statewide reporting systems.** These measures may be more appropriate for an accountability system than measures of students' individual social and emotional competencies because school climate and supports for SEL are areas that school staff can directly influence, and measurement tools tend to be more advanced. Among the measures of school climate states might consider: Student, parent, and teacher school climate surveys, to evaluate school conditions and supports, along with suspension rates and chronic absenteeism to evaluate the outcomes of these conditions.
- 3. Even if not incorporated into accountability systems, states can provide districts with well-validated tools for measuring social-emotional learning and school climate.** Well-designed and well-implemented measurement tools can help educators make strategic decisions about needed investments in student services, programs, and professional development. These can range from measures of school climate and students' social-emotional competencies to diagnostic measures such as protocols for observing and reflecting on teacher and school practices.
- 4. State agencies and districts should provide schools with resources and technical assistance as they seek to advance social-emotional learning and supports.** . Data alone will not drive school success. Staff need to be trained to analyze and act on the data they collect and to implement high-quality programs, professional development, and school organizational changes that support students' development. State-level support may include technical assistance for program development or the facilitation of peer-learning networks, as well as providing state and federal funding to support schools' efforts.

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