

ESSA Paves Way for Deeper Access to Wealth of K-12 Data

Increased transparency a key part of new statute

By [Alyson Klein](#)

The [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) scales back the federal role when it comes to accountability and school improvement, and grants states and districts new flexibility in using federal funds. But, as part of its bipartisan grand bargain, it also bolsters some federal requirements in one key area: transparency.

[ESSA](#), which replaced the [No Child Left Behind Act](#), calls for states and districts to provide test scores for some vulnerable groups of students for the first time ever, including foster children, homeless students, and students from military families.

And, in addition to those outcomes, it requires states and districts to report on a variety of factors that help capture the types of instructional resources students have access to and whether they have qualified teachers, and a safe school environment.

Data Requirements

For instance, states and districts will now have to report on school-by-school expenditures, and specify how many of their English-language learners have been struggling to reach proficiency after five or more years.

[ESSA](#) also moves some data requirements—like school climate and safety—to school report cards, where they can be easily accessible to parents. Postsecondary enrollment rates—if available, as they are in the majority of states—will also have to go on report cards.

All of that will add up to a lot more information for parents, policymakers, and the advocacy community, said Daria Hall, the interim vice president for government affairs and communications at the Education Trust, which advocates for poor and minority students.

The new requirements “are incredibly important for parents to make informed choices on behalf of their children, for advocates to launch advocacy campaigns, and for policymakers to really be able to assess whether their investments are paying off,” she said.

More Transparency

The Every Student Succeeds Act includes a host of new requirements aimed at greater transparency when it comes to student outcomes, access to resources, and more, in areas including:

State Accountability Systems: Report cards will now have to give more detail on the state’s overall student achievement goal, how many students a school must have from a particular subgroup for those students to be included for accountability purposes, and the list of indicators used to measure a schools’ performance.

Foster Children, Homeless Students, Students From Military Families: For the first time, states will have to break out the student achievement data and graduation rates of these students, just as they do for other “subgroups” like racial minorities, those from low-income families, and students in special education.

Long-Term English-Language Learners: States and districts will have to report the number and percentage of students who have been identified as English-language learners and attended school in the district for five years or more without being reclassified as proficient in English.

Per-Pupil Expenditures: States will have to enumerate just how much they are spending per student in each district and each school, which could help highlight disparities.

Post-Secondary Enrollment: For the first time, states will be required to report these rates, if available, on their report cards.

Crosstabulation: States will have to report data—including test scores and participation rates, performance on school quality indicators, and graduation rates—and in a manner that can be “crosstabulated,” to help researchers and advocates better understand certain groups of students.

Source: Every Student Succeeds Act

And crafting the new requirements didn’t generate the same kind of political fights as negotiations on other parts of the legislation, such as accountability.

“People have very different opinions about the federal role” in K-12 education, Hall said, “but there is shared agreement that transparency is important.”

An architect of ESSA expects the transparency requirements could serve as an important check on the new law.

“I am hopeful that states will use this data and information, in combination with the flexibility of ESSA, to not just ascertain achievement gaps, but also act responsibly to close them,” said Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., the top Democrat on the House education committee who pushed for many of the new requirements, along with Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash, the ranking member of the Senate education committee. But, Scott added, “if achievement gaps persist, ESSA ensures that federal policymakers will have the data and information to demand increased federal protections to better serve disadvantaged students.”

Funding Information

One of the most-talked-about new requirements: Districts must now make it clear how much they are actually spending in each school.

And they have to specify how much money schools are getting from different sources, including the district, the state, and the federal government. That requirement was included in an early draft of the law written by Sen. Lamar

Alexander, R-Tenn., and it stayed in the bill through the legislative finish line.

That provision has drawn excitement in the civil rights community.

“We do not have enough dollars in education and we need every single dollar to be working very hard,” said Liz King, the director of education policy for the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. “That will only happen when we know where they are.”

Another potentially powerful new requirement: States and districts will have to present their academic data, including test results and graduation rates, in a form that can be easily “crosstabulated” so that researchers can better isolate the performance of certain types of students. One possible example: finding dropout rates for male English-learners.

The ability to track students at that level could help states and districts figure out the best interventions for schools where a particular group of students aren’t performing well, said Adaku Onyeka-Crawford, a counsel for education at the National Women’s Law Center.

The requirement will allow districts to have “more detailed data and make sure their interventions are based on facts and data instead of generalizations and oversimplifications about how students are doing,” she said.

While districts and schools aren’t required to use the information to figure out how to fix persistent problems, Onyeka-Crawford expects that many will want to.

Long Time Coming

Some of the new reporting requirements have been a long time in the making.

For instance, the Military Child Education Coalition has been pushing for the past seven years for military children to get their own reporting category,

alongside racial minorities, disadvantaged children, students in special education, and English-language learners.

“We don’t know how military children are faring academically,” said David Lapan, the organization’s senior director for the National Capitol Region. “We know the challenges they face, moving frequently and parent separation, but we don’t know if they are overcoming those challenges because there is an absence of data.”

Once ESSA kicks in fully—during the 2017-18 school year—advocates for military students will be able to see if, and where, such students are falling short of their peers and get clues on how to help them get back on track, Lapan said.

That’s not to say every reporting requirement that advocates wanted was included in the law.

The Military Child Education Coalition, for instance, had wanted data requirements on the children of both active-duty military, which covers about 1.5 million children, and the National Guard and Reserve, which covers about another half million. But the law only focuses on active-duty personnel.

Lapan is hoping that states will continue to track those students. Right now, 19 states consider outcomes for military children and most of those include the children of National Guard service members in the mix.

What’s more, advocates for Asian-American students had hoped to get a requirement for more precise reporting on those children, given that the category encompasses such a diverse mix of backgrounds.

In the end, ESSA didn’t require the specificity they wanted. But it did empower the department to help states better differentiate among Asian students, if states choose to. Last week, the department made \$1 million in grants available for this purpose.

Understandable to Parents

One big hurdle that comes along with the new requirements: ensuring that the data will actually be accessible and easy for parents and advocates to understand.

It will be a challenge, Hall said, "to make sure that the data are high-quality and accurate and comparable."

State chiefs are up to that task, said Maureen Wentworth Matthews, the director of Education Data and Information Systems at the Council of Chief State School Officers. After all, over the past decade, states have made great strides in improving their data collection and reporting systems, she said.

In an email, she said states "are ready and willing to take the lead in meeting the new requirements to help ensure state accountability and school improvement systems better meet the needs of all students."

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<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/05/06/essa-paves-way-for-deeper-access-to.html>