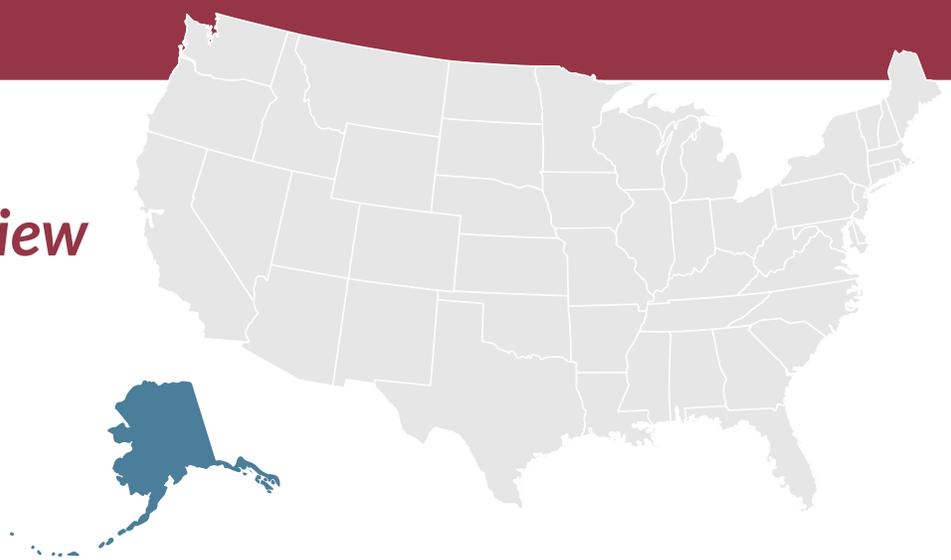


# An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans

## Alaska



### *Project Overview*

**B**ellwether Education Partners, in partnership with the Collaborative for Student Success, convened an objective, independent panel of accountability experts to review ESSA state plans. We sought out a diverse group of peer reviewers with a range of political viewpoints and backgrounds, and we asked them to review each state’s accountability plan with an eye toward capturing strengths and weaknesses.

We aimed to provide constructive feedback to the states, and to serve as a source of straightforward information to the public so that they are better able to engage policymakers if and how they see fit. Inherently, this independent process could not take into account the numerous political and situational challenges that occur in every state. We are in no way attempting to diminish those challenges, but the scope of this review was to compare the rigor and comprehensive nature of state accountability plans.

Peers worked in small teams to review the plans that states formally submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. After reviewing independently, the peers met for two days to discuss their individual reviews and work together on the collaborative draft you’ll see below. The teams were asked to use their discretion and expertise to respond to and score each rubric item, and those scores were normed across states and peers.

Each state was given the opportunity to review the draft peer analysis and to provide substantive additions and corrections. Still, the reviews should be considered a snapshot of state plans as of September–November 2017, and we anticipate that states will continue to update their plans going forward.

To read more about the project, as well as a list of the expert peer reviewers, visit the Bellwether website [here](#).

## Overall Strengths and Weaknesses

**Strengths:** What are the most promising aspects of the state’s plan? What parts are worth emulating by other states?

The strength of Alaska’s plan is rooted in the acknowledgement that the state faces some of the most difficult demographic, geographic, and infrastructural challenges in the nation, yet it still lays out a detailed plan to address those issues. Alaska has a good balance of rigor and attainability in its long-term goals and measures of interim progress.

Alaska’s goal of cutting the achievement gap in half within 10 years provides a strong starting point for growth. In addition to being simple, unique, and evidence based, the state’s list of indicators places a strong focus on growth and achievement along with measuring college and career readiness.

In addition, Alaska’s 100-point system for grading schools is straightforward, as are the labels for each rating: superior, satisfactory, needs improvement, targeted support, or comprehensive support. These school ratings incorporate subgroup performance across accountability indicators, and the chosen indicators emphasize both growth and achievement and keep the focus on academic progress. This grading system will be helpful to parents and other stakeholders to understand school performance for all schools throughout the state.

**Weaknesses:** What are the most pressing areas for the state to improve in its plan? What aspects should other states avoid?

The state must overcome a recent history of instability with standards and assessments in order to create a foundation for future success. Alaska’s school performance index lays out several good ideas, but the plan does not include historical data to show how rigorous it will be in differentiating schools.

The plan’s greatest weakness rests in its lack of rigor in identifying schools for support and the corresponding exit criteria. The definition of “consistently underperforming” sets a very high bar for identification. It’s difficult to determine if the state’s methodology will result in identifying those schools with students most in need.

The exit criteria for comprehensive support schools allow identified schools to exit even if they are still performing in the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools. This undermines the goal of the comprehensive support process—to support schools to implement improvements that result in sustained progress. The exit criteria for comprehensive and targeted support schools requires that students progress from one level to another on each accountability indicator, but the state has not yet established levels. To give meaning to the exit criteria, the state must set ambitious levels of performance.

# Plan Components

Each state’s plan has been rated on a scale of 1 (“This practice should be avoided by other states”) to 5 (“This could be a potential model for other states”).

**Goals:** Are the state’s vision, goals, and interim targets aligned, ambitious, and attainable? Why or why not?



Alaska proposes a long-term goal of reducing by half the percentage of students not reaching the proficient or advanced achievement levels on the Alaska Performance Evaluation for Alaska’s Schools (PEAKS) assessment in English language arts (ELA) and in mathematics over 10 years (by the school year 2026-27). The state notes that it considered setting a common goal of 75 percent proficiency for all students and subgroups, but that it received stakeholder feedback suggesting that goal was unattainable.

The percentage of “all students” scoring at least proficient on PEAKS was 38.4 percent on ELA and 31.8 percent in math in the baseline year. At the end of 10 years, the long-term goal for ELA for all students will be 69.2 percent proficient or advanced, and in math it will be 65.9 percent proficient or advanced. A goal of cutting the gap in half requires that the lowest-performing subgroups in the state (Alaska Native/American Indian, Economically Disadvantaged, Students with Disabilities, and English Learners) make more progress annually than the “all students” group to make significant progress in closing statewide proficiency. While these goals are ambitious in that they roughly double proficiency rates in 10 years, they still fall far short of fully closing achievement gaps and ensuring that all students are meeting grade-level standards.

Considering Alaska’s unique challenges with geography and demographics, its goal to close the achievement gap by 50 percent for all children within 10 years is ambitious. However, more details are necessary to determine if the goal is attainable. For instance, what is the trajectory to completely close the achievement gap?

Alaska will use the same long-term goal of 90 percent for the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate for all students and for each subgroup of students by the school year 2026-27. While Alaska’s long-term goal for academic achievement is not the same goal for all students at the end of 10 years, the graduation rate data over the previous five years indicates that the annual increases needed to reach the same long-term goal for the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate are more realistic for all groups than they would be for the academic achievement goals. Additionally, Alaska proposes the same long-term goal of 93 percent for the five-year adjusted cohort graduation rate for all students and for each subgroup of students by the school year 2026-27. The gap between the 10-year graduation rate and proficiency goals indicates that many students will receive diplomas without achieving proficiency.

Alaska proposes a long-term goal of 70 percent for English learners making progress in achieving English language proficiency as measured by the statewide English language proficiency assessment. This goal will include the percentage of ELs meeting the target for making progress in learning English as well as those who attain proficiency. An EL student who reaches criteria for proficiency will be considered to have made progress.

**Standards and Assessments:** Is the state’s accountability system built on high-quality standards and assessments aligned to college and career readiness? Why or why not?

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Alaska’s plan declares that the state adopted more rigorous math and English language arts standards in 2012. The timing would suggest the standards are aligned with the college- and career-ready standards that many states adopted around the same time. Based on stakeholder input, the state has decided to keep the standards in place.

Alaska’s assessment system is in flux. In 2015, Alaska administered the Alaska Measures of Progress, which was aligned to the standards. Due to technical issues, the state did not assess students in 2016. In 2017, the state administered a new assessment (PEAKS) for the first time. Alaska indicates that it plans to administer PEAKS going forward, but the state is considering transitioning to end-of-course tests in high school.

Alaska does not make mention of its plans for alternative assessment. Moreover, it is unclear from the plan whether PEAKS is a high-quality assessment system and what the results will show about whether students are meeting the new standards. However, it does appear to be aligned to the state standards.

Alaska does not currently offer assessments in any language other than English despite having a student population where 42 percent of students speak different dialects of the Yup’ik languages and 10 percent speak Spanish.

Lastly, Alaska could strengthen its plan by providing more information about its alternate achievement standards and aligned assessments for students with the most severe cognitive disabilities and ensuring that it has a process in place to meet the 1 percent cap on alternate assessments for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

The lack of revised science standards, absence of a clear plan on its high school assessment, and the recent instability around state assessment administration raise questions about whether Alaska’s accountability system is based on high-quality standards and assessments.

**Indicators:** Are the state’s chosen accountability indicators aligned to ensure targets and goals are met and likely to lead to improved educational outcomes for students? Why or why not?

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Alaska is using straightforward and valid measures of achievement, growth, graduation rates, and English language proficiency (ELP). For K-8 schools, Alaska has the following indicators: achievement in ELA and math, growth on ELA and math, English language proficiency progress, chronic absenteeism, reading by grade 3, and interim assessments. For high schools the indicators are achievement in ELA and math, ELP progress, four-year graduation rate, five-year graduation rate, chronic absenteeism, freshman on track, and Alaska Performance Scholarship (APS) eligibility.

The state will weigh academic indicators heavily: 90 percent in K-8 and 85 percent in high schools. The chronic absenteeism measure evaluates student-level attendance. Each student who misses at least 10 percent or more of school days will be deemed chronically absent.

The state chose five measures of school quality and student success. Four of the five include research-based measures: chronic absenteeism, reading by 3rd grade, 9th grade on track, and Alaska Performance Scholarship eligibility (including completing a college- and career-ready curriculum, achieving a benchmark GPA, achieving college- and career-ready benchmarks on the ACT, SAT, or WorkKeys). The latter two place emphasis on students staying on track and graduating ready for college and careers.

The final school quality indicator is a measure of student participation in interim assessments in grades K-8, to encourage schools to administer such tests and use them to inform instruction. While there is evidence that strategic use of formative assessments improves student outcomes, it is unclear that a higher quantity of such assessments will do so. Without more information about the quality of the assessments, this appears to be a weak indicator. Alaska might improve this indicator by establishing state guidance for quality and administration of interim assessments, including performing an assessment audit and ensuring that assessments are aligned to Alaska standards. However, the interim assessments indicator only receives 2 percent weight in K-8.

The state will calculate achievement in compliance with the 95 percent requirement and weight the four-year cohort graduation rate (20 percent) at double the five-year rate (10 percent). Schools will get more points for students who make more progress and achieve proficiency or better, although they will also receive points for some students who declined in achievement level from one year to the next.

Of concern is the fact that only the all-students group is included in the accountability system, meaning that subgroup improvement is not incentivized. Overall, however, the accountability indicators and weighting are aligned to the state's academic and graduation rate goals.

**Academic Progress:** Has the state created sufficient incentives for schools to care about both student proficiency and student growth over time? Why or why not?



Alaska weights both growth and achievement heavily in the accountability system for grades K-8 (36 percent achievement and 40 percent growth). Like many states, Alaska does not have a growth measure for high schools.

For grades K-8, Alaska calculates growth based on improvement on the state reading and math assessments from one year to the next across categories (i.e. basic proficient to proficient). Schools receive points for moving a student at any level (above or below proficiency) to a higher level, or for maintaining a student at a given level (more points for maintaining at higher levels). Schools also receive (albeit fewer) points for students who decline

in achievement from year to year. That creates disincentives for schools to prioritize growth for all kids. In sum, the system awards more points for higher levels of growth, but does not place special emphasis on getting students to proficiency.

Additionally, the state’s plan lacks significant details and clarity on the frequency and content pertaining to the high school assessment system. The state needs to better articulate how it will test students in high school and how schools will be held accountable.

**All Students:** Does the state system mask the performance of some subgroups of students, or does it have adequate checks in place to ensure all students (including all subgroups of students) receive a high-quality education? Why or why not?



Alaska’s system is mixed on accounting for the performance of all students. On the positive side, the state uses a low minimum group size of 10 for student subgroups and factors subgroups meaningfully into school ratings (called “designations”). For example, to earn the top designation, a school must have all subgroups meeting measures of interim progress and long-term goals. A school cannot be rated “satisfactory” (the second designation) if identified for comprehensive or targeted support. While the state has set measures of progress and goals, it has yet to determine the threshold index scores for school designations.

However, the state’s proposed methodology of identifying schools for targeted support and improvement is not robust. The definition of “consistently underperforming” sets a very high bar for identification and is unlikely to capture all or most of the schools with students who need additional support.

Schools in Alaska, however, cannot receive the state’s highest ranking of “superior” unless all subgroups “meet measures of interim progress and/or long-term goals.”

In sum, while Alaska’s system will provide transparent reporting on the progress and achievement of all students, it falls short on robust identification of schools with struggling subgroups.

**Identifying Schools:** Is the state’s plan to identify schools for comprehensive and targeted support likely to identify the schools and student groups most in need?

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Alaska’s plan details an index system based on 100 points that it will use to differentiate all public schools in the state. All accountability indicators will be included in the index, and schools will earn points based on their performance level on each indicator. The number of points earned is the sum of the points earned for each indicator according to the point attribution tables. Each school will receive an overall score from 0 to 100, which will determine one of five designations: superior, satisfactory, needs improvement, targeted support, or comprehensive support.

Alaska schools won’t receive designations until the 2018-19 school year, as the state will base initial designations on the 2017-2018 accountability system data. As a result, the cut points for the overall score and academic performance that schools need to have in order to qualify for each of the five designations is not detailed in the state’s ESSA plan. Without this information, it is unclear if the state’s plan for differentiation is rigorous. The lowest two categories—targeted and comprehensive support—follow the letter of the law, but do not go beyond it to address Alaska’s specific needs.

Alaska will identify the lowest-performing 5 percent of Title I schools for comprehensive support intervention consistent with the statutory requirement. The state will rank all schools based on their overall index scores and lack of progress over the previous three years, except that if a school is meeting the measures of interim progress for all subgroups on the academic indicators, it will not be identified. Schools’ rankings are based on the performance of all students. This system is focused on school performance on academic indicators and considers whether a school is improving.

The proposed methodology for identifying schools for targeted support is weak. Alaska will identify schools for “additional targeted support” consistent with the minimum statutory requirement—schools with subgroups performing below the highest level of comprehensive support schools. The state will identify schools with “consistently underperforming” subgroups only if they underperform on all indicators in the system (with thresholds not yet determined) for two consecutive years, aren’t meeting any of the measures of interim progress on academic indicators, and have not shown any improvement on any indicator for two consecutive years. This is a very high bar for identification, and may result in few if any identified schools.

Despite using a similar school grading system in prior years, Alaska does not provide any data predicting how many schools may be identified in each category based on past performance.

**Supporting Schools:** Are the state’s planned interventions in comprehensive and targeted support schools evidence-based and sufficiently rigorous to match the challenges those schools face? Why or why not?

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Alaska doesn’t provide much information on planned interventions in struggling schools, or on how it will support districts and schools in choosing evidence-based improvement strategies. In addition, the state’s intervention strategies are vague and the timeline for intervention is protracted.

Alaska does include information on the types of support the state will provide to those schools that fail to exit comprehensive support status. Specifically, it commits to additional oversight and involvement in schools that don’t make progress and lists a range of possible interventions—including convening a state-led support team as well as replacing teachers and principals. The interventions aren’t prioritized, and it’s unclear what the state will ultimately commit to doing.

Alaska will periodically review resource allocation to support school improvement in each district in the state serving a significant number or percentage of schools identified for comprehensive or targeted support and improvement. The state does not provide detail on how funds, including the 7 percent set-aside, will be awarded and whether it will be by formula or through a competitive process. Additionally, the state should indicate if and how it intends to provide direct student services using the optional 3 percent set-aside, which provides another opportunity for the state to align school improvement activities with its statewide goals.

**Exiting Improvement Status:** Are the state’s criteria for schools to exit comprehensive and targeted support status sufficient to demonstrate sustained improvements? Why or why not?

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Alaska has weak criteria for identified schools to exit improvement status. On the one hand, identified schools must perform one level better on each indicator than they performed for initial identification to exit comprehensive support status. This is stronger than states that propose a single criterion of no longer being in the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools. However, Alaska indicates that schools will meet the exit criteria even if they are still in the bottom 5 percent after three years. It is unclear how likely this is to occur or precisely how levels will be defined, particularly for the school quality indicators. It is also unclear whether a school will be re-identified if it is still in the bottom 5 percent after meeting exit criteria. Based on the language in the plan, there is certainly the potential for schools remaining in the bottom 5 percent to exit comprehensive support status without having made sufficient or meaningful improvement. Therefore, the exit criteria for comprehensive support would be much stronger if this component were removed.

For high schools identified for low graduation rate, the sole exit criterion proposed is that the school must have achieved an overall graduation rate of 67 percent or higher. This is a minimal criterion and will do little to ensure that these schools have achieved meaningful or sustainable progress in increasing graduation rates.

Alaska proposes that to exit targeted support status, the subgroup for which the school was identified must have improved one level on each indicator in the accountability system. While this exit criterion requires across-the-board improvement, it does not require deep or sustained improvement on academic indicators. In addition, the levels have not yet been defined, so it is unclear how robust this will be in practice.

**Continuous Improvement:** Has the state outlined a clear plan to learn from its implementation efforts and modify its actions accordingly, including through continued consultation and engagement of key stakeholders? If not, what steps could the state take to do so?



Alaska has a strong plan in place for including a diverse set of stakeholders to support struggling schools. A local, community-focused, “all-hands-on-deck” approach to school improvement is likely to yield results for the schools most in need. However, Alaska does not include much about its plans to continue stakeholder engagement and continuously improve.

As referenced above, however, Alaska includes information on continuous improvement in the school improvement process for those schools that fail to exit comprehensive support status. The state lists interventions that it will consider, but they aren’t prioritized, and it’s unclear what the state will ultimately execute.