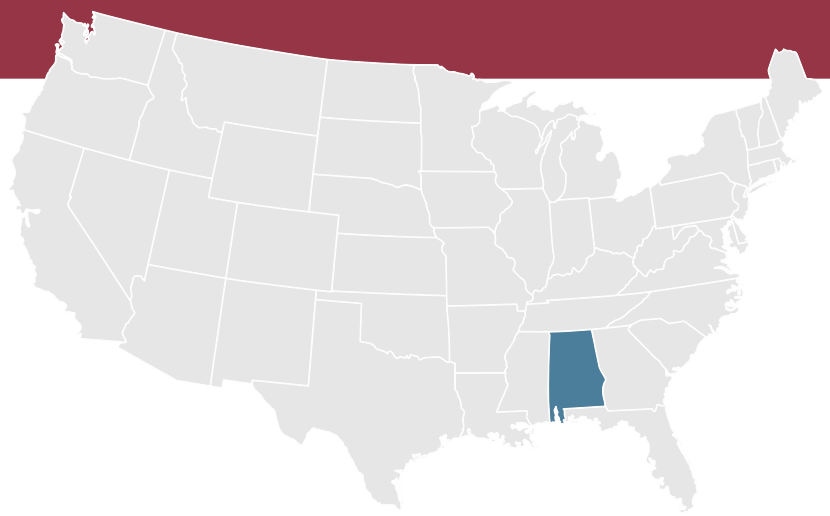


An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



Alabama

Project Overview

Bellwether 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?

Alabama’s academic achievement and growth indicators are weighted significantly in elementary, middle, and high school. In addition, the state includes a growth indicator in high school, although it should be further defined.

The state goes above what is required for identifying schools for comprehensive support. Alabama will identify the bottom 6 percent of Title I schools and schools with a graduation rate that is more than 10 percent below the state’s average graduation rate. These measures will theoretically allow more schools and students to receive the supports needed to be successful.

To support struggling schools, Alabama recently created an Office of School Improvement and Turnaround, which will bring attention to school support and intervention. The state should closely monitor its evidence-based supports to develop a base of best practices.

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

Alabama’s plan lacks detail. Most concerning is that the state does not articulate how it will calculate academic growth, nor has it selected an assessment. Alabama’s plan states that its standards and assessments are aligned and rigorous, but does not provide information or data to support that claim. Without this information, it is difficult to meaningfully assess several elements of the plan, including weighting of the accountability index and the identification and exiting systems for low-performing schools.

Due to insufficient details regarding how individual student subgroups will be incorporated into the statewide system, it is not clear how disaggregated subgroup accountability will be calculated into the school’s overall index score. In addition, long-term goals will continue to leave many Alabama children unprepared for success after high school, particularly low-income students, children of color, English learners, and students with disabilities.

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?



Alabama has outlined several lofty and admirable goals: having prepared graduates, creating multiple pathways to careers and higher education, maintaining superior educator preparation programs, supporting continuous improvement of world-class educators, creating equitable and accountable systems, promoting healthy and safe systems and schools, and truly engaging family and communities. However, the plan is frequently short on specifics as to how those goals will be achieved.

Alabama’s long-term achievement goal is to cut the percentage of students who do not reach proficiency in half by 2030. This goal is both ambitious and attainable, yet 13 years to reach this goal may be too long. Alabama’s previous goal to achieve the same progress in half the number of years, and the state should provide evidence as to why 13 years is appropriate based on past performance.

Similar to the state’s achievement goal, Alabama’s long-term high school graduation rate goal is to decrease the percentage of non-graduating students by 50 percent by 2030. The state will incorporate both a four-year and a five-year graduation rate.

English learners in Alabama would be expected to be proficient in English within eight years (although the plan says seven years, the first year isn’t counted). However, Alabama does not provide baseline data for English learners, noting that baseline data will be included once the state has two years’ worth of data. As a result, it is difficult to determine the feasibility of their targets. Alabama should also provide baseline data for the long-term goals set for English language proficiency to provide context regarding their ambition and attainability.

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?



Given the lack of information about standards and assessments in Alabama’s plan, it is difficult to assess if they are high quality and aligned to college and career readiness. The plan indicates that the math and English language arts standards were revised and adopted in 2016, though there is little specific information provided other than they

were developed with input from Course of Study Committees. The plan would be strengthened with evidence that the standards are aligned with credit-bearing postsecondary coursework.

Alabama makes almost no mention of the state’s assessment system except to say that “the assessments system will be completely aligned to these standards and will effectively measure the state’s ability to help students master the same.” Alabama had been administering ACT Aspire, but the state board recently decided to transition away from this system. Additional information would be needed to properly evaluate whether the replacement assessments will measure college and career readiness and provide educators and parents with useful information about student performance. The plan mentions reading and math assessments without reference to measuring writing skills, which are critical to postsecondary success.

There is concern that the state does not have enough time to develop assessments that are meaningful, effective, and aligned to standards—a process that is both rigorous and time consuming.

Alabama provides no assessments available in languages other than English at present, although the plan states that they will begin in 2018-19 and an advisory committee will develop those content assessments. While Alabama indicates that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities will be assessed using an alternate assessment that is aligned to the academic achievement standards in the state, the plan does not discuss strategies that will be put in place to specifically meet the needs of students with disabilities, and how inclusion in the general assessment will support ambitious goals for achievement and graduation.

The state should provide the steps it will take to ensure that it does not exceed the 1 percent cap on participation in the alternate assessments. Moreover, the state should continue to engage English learner and disability groups to solicit feedback on current assessment accessibility efforts and on what more may be needed to ensure equal access for these students.

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?



Alabama has included a list of high-quality indicators. At the elementary and middle school levels, academic achievement and growth represent 80 percent of the score, with English language proficiency (ELP) at 5 percent and chronic absenteeism at 15 percent. For schools with a 12th grade, achievement and growth will count for 45 percent, graduation rate at 30 percent, ELP at 5 percent, chronic absenteeism at 10 percent, and college and career readiness at 10 percent.

It is unique that Alabama will include growth as an indicator in high school, and the state should be commended for doing so. However, the plan lacks specificity on how growth will be measured at each level. With the switch to a new and seemingly unknown assessment system, this is a consequential missing piece.

The plan mentions that students will be identified as career- and college-ready by completing one of six options, but it is not clear exactly what is meant in each option or how a school or district should implement these options with fidelity. Further details are needed to fully assess this indicator.

In addition, Alabama will include both four- and five-year graduation rates in its high school graduation indicator. It is common to include a five-year graduation rate in acknowledgement that some students may require more time to graduate, but the state does not specify how it will weight each measure in the accountability system. If the state plans to equally weight the two graduation rates, it may not send an adequate signal of the importance of on-time graduation.

Alabama defines its “chronic absenteeism” indicator as the “percentage of students missing 15 or more days in each school year.” While this indicator may help to identify struggling students early, Alabama needs to clarify details on how the measure will be assessed, such as whether both an excused and unexcused absence will factor into this measure.

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?



Alabama gives equal weight to proficiency and growth at the elementary and middle school levels and gives growth 5 percent more weight in schools with 12th grade. That should result in attention to both achievement and growth. Alabama’s plan places a smaller weight for high schools (20 percent) on student proficiency than for the growth measure (25 percent), and the highest weight (30 percent) for the graduation rate is especially troubling given its attempt to automatically award alternative diplomas to students taking an alternate assessment. Alabama needs to provide more information about its alternative achievement standards and aligned assessment given that these students are awarded an alternate diploma and are included in its graduation rate indicator. At the same time, the weight for ELP progress (5 percent) is too low. The risk of this balance is insufficient attention to actual grade-level performance and to English learners in the state.

Moreover, a big point of contention in the Alabama plan is the lack of detail regarding how growth will be measured and the assessments that will be utilized. Without this information, it is difficult to assess the state’s plan for academic progress. This lack of detail about the growth measurement limits our understanding of how this will truly play out with educators, students, and parents.

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?

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Alabama’s plan indicates that a summative score based on a 100-point scale will be used for each district, school, and the state. However, some parts of the Alabama accountability system lack details. For example, it is not clear whether, and at what weight, the state will include disaggregated outcomes for each student subgroup in the overall rating.

Alabama chose a minimum group size of 20 for inclusion in the accountability system, arguing that it is sufficient and statistically reliable while still protecting student privacy. The plan dismisses using a smaller group size of 10 with no documentation, while providing a lengthy explanation as to why a larger group size would have been inappropriate. However, the state’s data shows that using a group size of 20 will result in multiple subgroups of students being left out of the accountability system in a significant number of schools. This is a lost opportunity to focus attention on equity and the performance of many subgroups of students.

Alabama elected to include former English learners in the English learner subgroup for accountability purposes. However, the state failed to specify how long former English learners would be included in the English learner subgroup. The inclusion of former English learners in the subgroup after they exit English learner services could mask the performance of current English learners, and the state should monitor its data to ensure sufficient transparency and attention to the needs of English learners. Because Alabama establishes a lengthy seven-year expectation for English learners to achieve language proficiency, this concern may be particularly acute, and the decision to include former English learners could further obscure data about the progress of students actively receiving language supports.

Separating former English learners from current English learners will help ensure that the data is accurate and meaningful, and that current English learners receive appropriate supports to be successful. The state should continue to measure the performance of former English learners separately for the purposes of reporting and informing program evaluation.

Any school that does not meet the 95 percent participation rate for statewide assessments for two consecutive years will receive a reduction of 2 percent on their summative score. However, the effect of this rule may be minimal, and the plan would be stronger if it included additional steps that will be taken to ensure that historically marginalized students are being included in the assessment.

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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Alabama’s plan outlines that schools in the bottom 6 percent, with graduation rates more than 10 percent below the state average graduation rate, and chronically underperforming subgroups will be targeted.

Alabama’s decision to identify the bottom 6 percent (beyond the statutory requirement of 5 percent) of schools for comprehensive support should be commended. This will allow more schools and students to receive the supports they need to be successful. However, the plan does not include any data or evidence indicating why the 6 percent threshold was selected.

Alabama should also be commended for its approach for identifying schools with a graduation rate more than 10 percent below the state average graduation rate. Currently, the state’s average graduation rate is 87 percent. That would mean the state is identifying schools with a graduation rate below 77 percent, which is 10 percentage points higher than what is required under ESSA. However, it is unclear whether the threshold for identification would change, thus not giving schools a clear benchmark of achievement. In other words, one year the threshold for identification could be 77 percent and the following year it could be 70 percent, depending on the state’s graduation performance.

Alabama will identify schools with one or more student subgroups performing at or below the level of the lowest-performing schools over three years without showing improvement for targeted support. Given the state’s plan to identify more schools for comprehensive support than the law requires, this methodology sets a higher-than-minimum performance threshold. However, the three-year definition for “consistently underperforming” allows schools struggling to serve all students and those students without support and intervention for too long. Additionally, the state sets no bar for defining the level of improvement required to avoid identification. If that standard is too low, minimal fluctuations in performance could allow schools with significant performance gaps to avoid intervention. Alabama provides no data regarding how many schools fit its criteria for identification.

Once again, how growth will be measured and the quality and rigor of the state’s assessments are two critical pieces of missing information needed to fully evaluate this component of the plan.

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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The state recently created an Office of School Improvement and Turnaround, which is creating and reviewing policies for school improvement and intervention. The technical assistance and supports described are admirable; however, there is too little detail to permit complete analysis at this point. In addition, increasing staff to provide the various levels of tiered support outlined in the plan may be challenging, as details about how this will be developed and funded are lacking.

As Alabama’s Office of School Improvement and Turnaround reviews the resource allocations that will help to serve identified schools, it should ensure that stakeholders from historically marginalized communities, such as parents of color, parents of English learners, and parents of students with disabilities, are included in the planning stages of any implementation plan.

The state will also provide technical assistance by periodically reviewing comprehensive school improvement plans. This will be offered through a variety of supports to schools and districts that will include generic offerings such as on-site technical assistance, off-site training sessions, embedded professional learning, virtual learning experiences, guidance documents, and templates to support needs assessment, improvement planning, implementation, and monitoring. The state mentioned pursuing evidence-based support, but the plan for implementing these measures is lacking.

Alabama provides no indication that the state will take aggressive action to support persistently struggling schools with evidence-based strategies with the potential to dramatically transform schools and serve students. The support system described is entirely process-oriented, focusing on needs assessment and plan development and monitoring. These steps are necessary, but insufficient, and the plan is vague and noncommittal to any specific action even where more rigorous intervention is warranted.

In addition, Alabama does not provide detail on how it plans to use the 7 percent of federal funds intended for school improvement activities, including whether it will award those funds by formula or through a competitive process. The state should also 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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Alabama provides minimal detail about requirements for schools to exit improvement status. For schools to exit comprehensive support, they must perform above the bottom 6 percent of schools and maintain improvement for two consecutive years. While the requirement for sustained improvement suggests some rigor above a purely normative exit requirement, the plan fails to define a threshold for improvement that the state will require. If the required level of improvement is too low, the normative ranking for exiting school improvement status could result in schools exiting improvement status because other schools’ progress slips, rather than because of actual meaningful progress. The state could strengthen its plan by identifying objective performance targets that demonstrate real, sustained progress and provide greater front-end transparency for schools.

In the exit criteria for additional targeted support and improvement, Alabama references closing the gap between identified subgroups. It is not clear what this means or how it relates to the rest of the system.

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?

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Alabama describes several ways that stakeholders were involved in the development of the state’s strategic plan, including multiple workgroups and a community engagement tour across the state to introduce residents to ESSA and the state’s plan. However, the plan lacks an explanation of how the state will modify its implementation efforts. It is not clear whether Alabama will continue to engage stakeholders as it moves forward. It is not clear whether parents of marginalized communities, such as students who are low-income, students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners, will continue to be consulted as districts outline implementation plans.