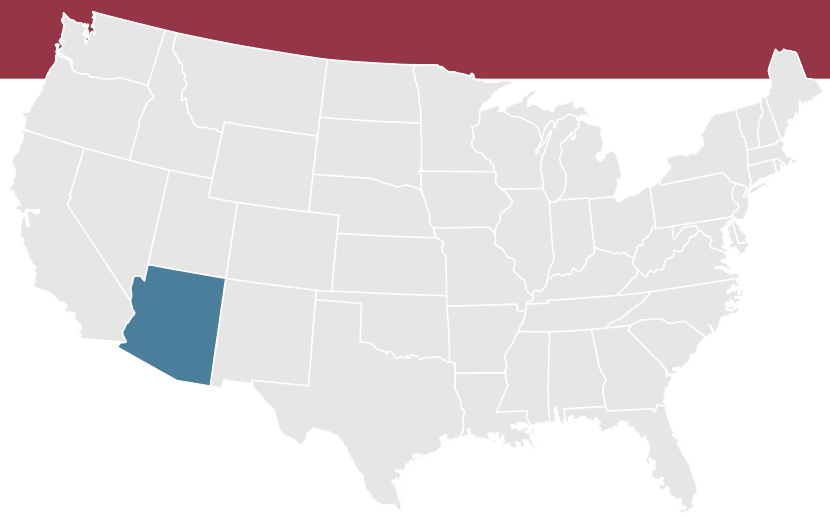


An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



Arizona

Project Overview

In partnership with the Collaborative for Student Success, Bellwether Education Partners, 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 writing their own reviews 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 April–June 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?

Arizona has a compelling education reform story to tell. Arizona has made NAEP gains in recent years, and its schools have been disproportionately represented among U.S. News & World Report rankings of the best schools in the country. The state has one of the most diverse charter school communities in the country, and has experimented with innovations ranging from pay for success for school improvement to education savings accounts. Arizona has a strong K-3 reading program focused on ensuring students are literate before advancing to more advanced grades. Additionally, Arizona has a rich ecosystem of education reform groups working within the state.

However, these examples or policy levers are not in Arizona’s ESSA plan. As presented, Arizona’s plan is partially incomplete and provides firm details to review in only a few sections. From what has been provided, a few potentially promising elements include the plan’s proposed balance of achievement and growth measures, which is a potential model for other states, and its innovative idea to incorporate a “menu” of school quality indicators.

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

Arizona’s plan lacks details, especially on how it will meaningfully incorporate subgroups into its accountability system, how it will identify schools for improvement, and the criteria low-performing schools would need to meet to exit improvement status. Overall, the plan Arizona submitted does not yet meet the technical requirements of ESSA, and it did not adequately address how it plans to use federal funds to help increase student achievement, increase options for students, or intervene in chronically low-performing schools.

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?



Arizona aims to have 90 percent of its students proficient in English and math and to have a 90 percent four-year graduation rate by 2030. It has set interim targets for each of these measures in three-year intervals, but those will apply in very different ways for different subgroups of students, and, absent data suggesting what’s feasible, the vast majority of them appear very ambitious. For example, the state needs to more than double the percentage of students proficient in 3rd grade language arts, and the proficiency rates for students with disabilities would need to rise from 15 percent today to 90 percent by 2030. Arizona’s plan would be stronger if it provided clear strategic guidance on how it intended to address these large gaps in the time period identified. In contrast, the state’s graduation rate goals appear more realistic, and the state has pegged those goals to leading states of today.

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?



Arizona adopted college and career readiness standards in 2010 and recently made small revisions of a mostly technical nature. It appears as though the state intends to continue utilizing its assessment, AZMerit, but the application does not provide significant details in this area. Arizona is planning to take advantage of the flexibility to use end-of-course assessments in eighth grade, which is a productive use of ESSA’s assessment flexibility. There was no mention of alternate assessments for students with disabilities.

Arizona is an English-only state, so the state does not translate its assessments into any other language. Given this policy environment, Arizona will need to be clear about how it will support its large English learner population. That information was not in its ESSA plan. Lastly, Arizona should strengthen its plan by 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. Overall, Arizona has presented only basic information about its approach to standards and assessment.

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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- 3
- ✓ 4
- 5

Arizona’s plan includes a relatively simple list of indicators with mostly straightforward explanations of how those indicators will be included in the state’s system. For elementary schools, its system will include student achievement (English-language arts, math, and science), student growth (both a normative and a growth-to-standard model), English-language proficiency, and measures of acceleration/ readiness. The acceleration measure has 5 “menu items” that schools can choose from to accrue points on the state rating system: accelerated math scores, decreases in the percentage of 3rd graders scoring minimally proficient in 3rd grade, subgroup improvement, special education inclusion, or chronic absenteeism.

The indicators for high school are identical, except a menu of college- and career-ready measures instead of acceleration, plus graduation rates (four-, five-, six-, and seven-year rates). The menu of college- and career-ready options include things like completing a CTE sequence, scoring high on the ACT, passing an AP test or the ASVAB, completing the FAFSA, or earning an industry recognized credential. Each of these are worth a different number of points per student.

While these “menu” items are an interesting way for the state to encourage schools to offer well-rounded curricula and meet student needs in a variety of ways, it could pose a challenge for educators and parents to understand how their respective schools compare. Moreover, Arizona should monitor its data to ensure that all of its options are comparable or if certain types of students are disproportionately likely to pursue certain pathways.

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?

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Arizona’s plan places a strong weight on student achievement and growth. It proposes to include a simple measure of student achievement (percent proficient) and two different measures of student growth. For K-8 schools, 30 percent of their rating would be based on achievement, 25 percent based on a normative growth measure that calculates the progress students make compared to their similarly performing peers, and 25 percent based on a growth measures that tracks whether students are on track to proficiency within three years or by the end of 8th grade, whichever comes first. Additionally, Arizona’s achievement measure is an index that gives students more credit for advancing to higher performance levels, but which does not allow students scoring at advanced levels to fully compensate for lower-performing students. Arizona deserves credit for designing a system that balances incentives for students to meet grade-level targets and, for those students who aren’t near the proficiency benchmark, to make progress year-over-year.

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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Arizona’s plan includes little information about how it would incorporate subgroup performance into school ratings beyond the statutorily required information. The state’s proposed n-size of 20 is encouraging, and the state presents data about how many different subgroups will be captured under a group size of 20 versus other alternatives. But it’s hard to tell what practical impact that would have, because Arizona does little more than promise to meet the minimal federal definitions to identify schools with low-performing subgroups for targeted support efforts.

Subgroups are also barely included in the state’s A-F grading system. They’re not included in high school ratings at all, and for elementary and middle schools they would play a very small role (schools could earn up to 6 points out of 100 for reducing school-level achievement gaps), but only if they chose that item on Arizona’s “menu” of school quality indicators.

Arizona is proposing to include former students with disabilities in the students-with-disabilities subgroup for two additional years after they are no longer receiving services. Since exiting students tend to have higher performance, the state should monitor its data to ensure it is not masking the performance of students who are still receiving services.

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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Arizona’s plan gives a list of indicators, and it specifies how those indicators would be weighted on a 100-point scale, but the plan does not appear to describe how final letter grades would be awarded. Arizona says it will meet the minimal federal requirements and identify the lowest 5 percent of all schools as in need of comprehensive support and identify for targeted support any school with a subgroup that, on its own, would qualify for the bottom 5 percent overall. Still, Arizona’s plan does not provide any specifics on how many schools might fall into that category.

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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In Arizona, schools identified for comprehensive and targeted support have an opportunity to apply for grants using a needs assessment and action plans. Prioritization is based on schools that show evidenced-based decision-making, selection of interventions, root cause analysis, greatest need, and strongest commitment to using funds for student achievement and outcomes. Arizona also provides a fiscal review process and technical assistance as needed.

However, Arizona’s school improvement plans are thin. The state mandates low-performing schools perform a comprehensive needs assessment that will look at leadership capacity, instructional practices, curriculum and assessments, and organizational climate and culture. Arizona says this will involve a number of stakeholders, including school staff, families, and community members, but the state does not provide any additional information on how it would target assistance. The needs assessment description is largely high level and provides little insight into how it would actually work, on what timeline, and if there were any clear guideposts or benchmarks. The state also provides a long list of tools for support and improvement, but how they all tie together is unclear.

There is also no description of how the state will use its 7 percent set-aside dedicated to school-improvement activities. Will it be sent out as formula, or as a competitive grant? What sort of application would a school need to complete in order to receive funds? Who will review the application and make a decision? The state did not answer these questions in this plan.

There is very little detail around what evidence-based strategies low-performing districts and schools will need to pursue, including any evidence for the list of strategies provided. If the state is going to devolve a lot of improvement and support to its districts, it should be clearer about that. However, it does appropriately address its involvement in school and district improvement, including stepping in when there is systemic failure to improve.

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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Arizona’s plan has only the most rudimentary of information regarding schools’ exiting improvement status. Schools may exit comprehensive support if they no longer meet identification criteria. For schools in need of targeted support, the same rule applies but without a timeline. The state is not detailed, clear, or rigorous about what schools would need to accomplish to exit improvement status, and it has not outlined criteria that would ensure schools are progressing and succeeding before being exited from improvement status.

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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Arizona does not provide sufficient description about how it will foster continuous improvement for all schools. Moreover, Arizona’s plan does not signal that the state is requiring or working to achieve meaningful engagement with the disability community, or parents in general. This is a missed opportunity to create a stronger, more useful, and more targeted plan.