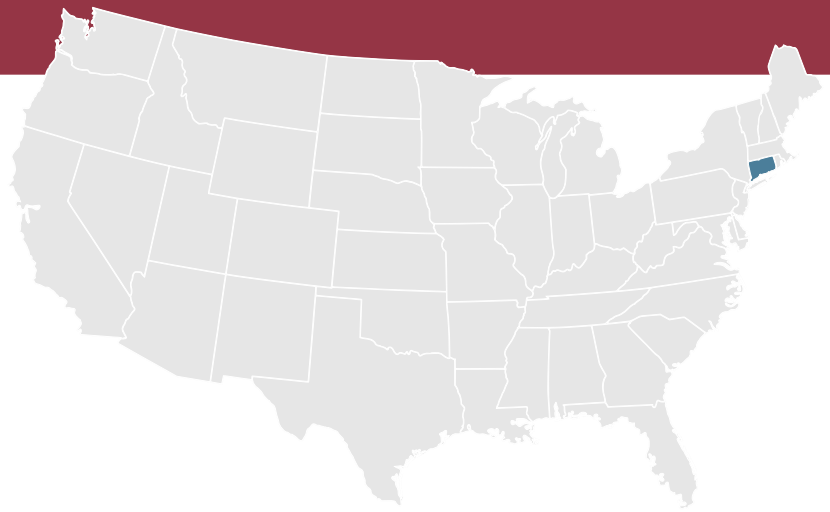


# An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



## Connecticut

### *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?

Connecticut deserves credit for including a robust list of measures in its accountability systems, including art, physical education, science, and college-going rates. Although the details around implementation matter, this is significant.

Connecticut significantly involved stakeholders in its planning process, which began prior to passage of ESSA. Through site visits, surveys, and focus groups, there was a substantial effort to engage practitioners, parents, and the public (although it remains unclear if all stakeholder groups were represented equitably). Connecticut has used the State Board of Education’s five-year comprehensive plan and its Next Generation Accountability System as a foundation to its ESSA plan. Although it hasn’t fully succeeded in aligning its proposed accountability system with its professed long-term vision, Connecticut could take specific steps to strengthen the cohesiveness of its efforts.

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

Overall, Connecticut’s plan has a number of areas for improvement. It does not include proficiency targets, and its accountability system does not include any measure capturing whether or not students are reaching the state’s grade-level standards. Under the state’s proposed accountability system, schools will be competing against each other for their place in the rankings, rather than against a predetermined standard. That lack of front-end transparency will present a challenge for educators, who won’t have clear goals to shoot for at the beginning of each school year. That issue also shows up in the state’s exit criteria for low-performing schools, which get to leave improvement status only once they jump enough schools in the state’s rankings.

The state’s plan also has a number of potentially negative implications for subgroups of students. The state’s use of a “high-needs” group, which would combine low-income students, English-language learners, and students with disabilities, may be well-intentioned, but it carries a number of potential weaknesses. Although the high-needs group will count for 40 percent of a school’s score, that may not work well from an educational standpoint, because these three groups have very different needs. And, by focusing exclusively on this group, Connecticut would be ignoring the performance of other groups, like black and Hispanic students. On top of those educational reasons for why the state might want to revisit this approach, it also appears to be in violation of federal law.

# 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?



Connecticut has outlined the goal of 100 percent of its students reaching their individual growth targets by 2030. The state uses a growth model that asks lower-performing students to make faster progress, and student-level targets are based on historical data for what students at different performance levels have achieved in the past.

While these goals may serve an important purpose in Connecticut, the state’s plan lacks targets for students meeting grade-level standards. ESSA allows states to use academic growth in their accountability system, but it specifically requires states to set achievement goals.

The state mentions an academic performance target in the accountability system section, but without data on past student performance by subgroup and established targets by subgroup, it is impossible to know whether this target is ambitious or aligned to any objective measure. The absence of a proficiency goal and targets is also inconsistent with the State Board of Education’s five-year comprehensive plan, which states that “every student is expected to meet high standards.”

Connecticut also does not yet have an English-language proficiency goal, which is also required by ESSA. The state explains that it is waiting to set its final goal until it has additional data, and it plans to use a methodology similar to how it measures growth in English and math (see below for more detail).

Connecticut has proposed setting its graduation rate goal at 94 percent for all students, which it aims to reach by 2029. The plan does not explain how the state chose its 94 percent target, but the goal itself will mean very different things for different groups of students. Although subgroups of students such as English-language learners would have to make steep progress to meet the state’s goal, the state is not asking for any gains in the graduation rates of Asian-American students, which are actually allowed to decline by almost 1 percentage points.

**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?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- ✓ 4
- 5

Connecticut’s involvement in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium exhibits its commitment to high-quality assessments that provide reliable, valid, and consistent data.

Still, there are a few areas where Connecticut could strengthen its plan. Although it mentions designated supports for English-language learners in the main state assessment, there is no mention of supports available for English-language learners who take the state’s alternate assessment. The state should also provide the steps it will take to ensure that it does not exceed the 1 percent cap on participation in the alternate 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?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- ✓ 4
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Connecticut says it plans to incorporate 12 total indicators into its accountability system. On the surface that appears like a lot, but not all 12 indicators apply to all grades, and one of them (participation rates) is not given a direct percentage weighting. Connecticut has a pie chart showing how these indicators would be weighted in a school with all grades K-12, but it might help schools understand the ratings a bit more if the state presented separate graphs for elementary, middle, and high schools. Looked at that way, elementary schools are held accountable for only four measures, student proficiency (including English-language arts, math, and science), growth, chronic absenteeism, and physical fitness. Similarly, while Connecticut’s pie chart seems to imply that academic measures (proficiency and growth) account for only 51.8 points out of 100 overall, not all measures apply to all schools. In reality, those same 51.8 points will count toward a total of 62.9 points possible for elementary schools, meaning academic measures are weighted at 82 percent of the total.

In terms of specific indicators, Connecticut deserves credit for attempting to include a range of different measures. Considering the limitations in statewide data collection of measures other than state-administered assessments, the indicators reflect an effort toward achieving a more comprehensive, holistic evaluation of school quality. For example, it has proposed ways to incorporate physical fitness and art into its accountability system. However, while the physical fitness measure appears to be grounded in an objective, statewide rating system, it may be inappropriate for many students with disabilities. And the state’s proposed arts access measure could allow schools to game the measure in unhelpful ways by labeling classes as “art” that might not be truly comparable, especially since the indicator is a measure of access, not success.

At the high school level, Connecticut deserves credit for incorporating college-going rates. This will help bridge the gap between K-12 and higher education and encourage schools to pay attention to what happens to students after they graduate. The state could further strengthen this indicator over time by also incorporating college remediation rates, as well as career-ready metrics like industry certifications or employment rates.

Connecticut plans to combine English-language proficiency and academic growth into a single indicator, which could be problematic if it conceals student performance on English-language proficiency. The state has not yet provided the weights of each of these components within the overall total. Connecticut would have a stronger plan if it described the weight it planned to give English-language proficiency and if it was sufficient to matter in a school's overall rating.

**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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Connecticut's accountability system incentivizes both academic achievement and growth over time, with those two indicators making up more than half of the summative rating. Connecticut has created a thoughtful growth model that evaluates the change in a student's scale score from year to year against pre-established targets pegged to the 60th percentile of past performance. That is, the state measured how much students have progressed in prior years, and then set its future targets at the 60th percentile of past performance. While this method sets ambitious growth targets fixed to a pre-determined criteria, and it expects students at lower incoming performance levels to make faster growth, this model is not explicitly pegged to grade-level targets.

This may not be an issue except that Connecticut's choice of an achievement index uses scale scores on a sliding basis, without any extra incentive for students to meet the state's grade-level standards. That model would allow some students to compensate for others and may hide lower-performing students, and it means Connecticut has not embedded grade-level benchmarks into its proposed system in any way.

**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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Connecticut plans to give its “high-needs” subgroup approximately 40 percent weight in each school’s rating, which is significant, but it omits other groups like black and Hispanic students. Connecticut sets a low threshold to include subgroups of students into its accountability system (an n-size of 20 students), but it does not provide data on how much impact this would have given that its focus is on the high needs group.

Moreover, Connecticut is proposing to use its combined “high needs” group to identify schools in need of targeted support, which has a number of problems. The group would be composed of students from a low socioeconomic background, English-language learners, and students with disabilities. While the goal with this group is to capture more students into the accountability system, it’s not clear what sort of intervention a school would design based on this combined group, since each of the component groups has different instructional needs. Moreover, given the relative size of each of these groups, English Learners and students with disabilities are likely to be drowned out by the much larger group of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Finally, ESSA requires that states pay attention to *all* subgroups. Connecticut’s proposal to limit its targeted support efforts to a subset of its student groups is inconsistent with federal requirements, and it would ignore other groups, such as black and Hispanic students.

The state is also proposing to include former English-language learners and students with disabilities for up to four or two years, respectively, 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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Connecticut plans to place schools into five categories based on their relative performance (that is, the top 25 percent of schools qualify for Category 1, the middle 50 percent of schools qualify for Category 2, and the bottom 25 percent are placed in Category 3). In addition, the state will also identify Category 4 and 5 schools as those in need of targeted and comprehensive support, respectively.

While this system is relatively easy to explain, it has a number of challenges. It creates hard cut points right around those quartiles, and schools may move in and out of different categories simply because other schools jumped them in the rankings. The state proposes to lower a school’s category one level if its high-needs group is a “significant outlier,” but it does not present a definition as to what this means.

As mentioned above, Connecticut’s plan to identify targeted support schools appears to violate federal requirements. Connecticut must revisit its definition and ensure that a school with *any* low-performing subgroup be identified for targeted support.

To identify high schools in need of comprehensive support based on their graduation rate, Connecticut proposes to look at the six-year graduation rate, and only if they failed to reach a 70 percent threshold in three consecutive years. ESSA sets the threshold at 67 percent, and the state would have a stronger plan that was more aligned to its long-term vision if it used its *four-year* graduation rate here.

Connecticut deserves credit for incorporating recognition for “schools of distinction.” The criteria Connecticut is using to identify those schools are comprehensive, appropriate, and worthy of replication by other states. Most states are focused on low-performing schools, and it’s nice to see Connecticut spend some effort to identify success stories as well.

**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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Connecticut has articulated a coherent plan to tailor its improvement efforts to school districts, particularly in the areas of talent management, academic growth and performance, English-language proficiency, climate and culture, and organizational effectiveness. Connecticut should be commended for outlining the strategies it will employ for those schools that need rigorous interventions and the steps it will take to inform the parents of those schools.

The state department of education has structured its teams around tiered supports for districts, and it will use nonregulatory guidance to offer evidence-based guides.

The state intends to award 70 percent of its school-improvement funds on a formula basis to districts with comprehensive support schools. The remaining 30 percent would be allocated based on a competition that would reward districts with evidence-based interventions that are most closely aligned with the needs identified in those schools. If the state is requiring districts to submit an application for support, then Connecticut should clarify what those requirements for approval include. Connecticut should also ensure that school-improvement strategies specifically support the groups of students that were the basis for the school’s identification.

Connecticut’s plan is rare in that it articulates at least some specific actions that schools must take if they continue to be identified as in need of comprehensive support (reconstitution, consolidation/ closure, or restructuring), but these actions may not kick in for 10 years. And even then, they are not clearly defined as to what schools would actually be required to do. This draws to question Connecticut’s stomach to force school improvement to those most averse or resistant.

**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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Connecticut states that comprehensive and targeted support schools will exit improvement status if they no longer meet the reason for their identification in the two consecutive years after identification and meet “Interim Progress Checkpoints.” It’s not clear what this approach will mean or if it’s sufficiently ambitious to ensure sustained improvements, particularly for the lowest-performing schools. Moreover, since Connecticut is using a normative identification system where schools are compared with each other, an identified school could jump in the rankings if other schools regress, even without improving its own performance.

**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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Connecticut articulates a few ways that schools and districts will continue to assess progress over time, but it does not specify actions the *state* plans to take. Throughout the plan Connecticut indicates that it will continue to engage stakeholders as it moves forward, but the details about the process and strategies used to engage parents of historically marginalized students are vague.

Even more concerning are the low participation rates of certain groups of parents/ grandparents/ guardians in surveys cited by the state. In data the state provides, 79.7 percent of the survey respondents were white, and more than 85 percent indicated they had completed a bachelor’s degree or higher. Both of those rates are far in excess of their representation in the state’s population as a whole. Going forward, Connecticut should adopt meaningful consultation strategies to ensure it is adequately hearing from parents of color and parents of all educational backgrounds.