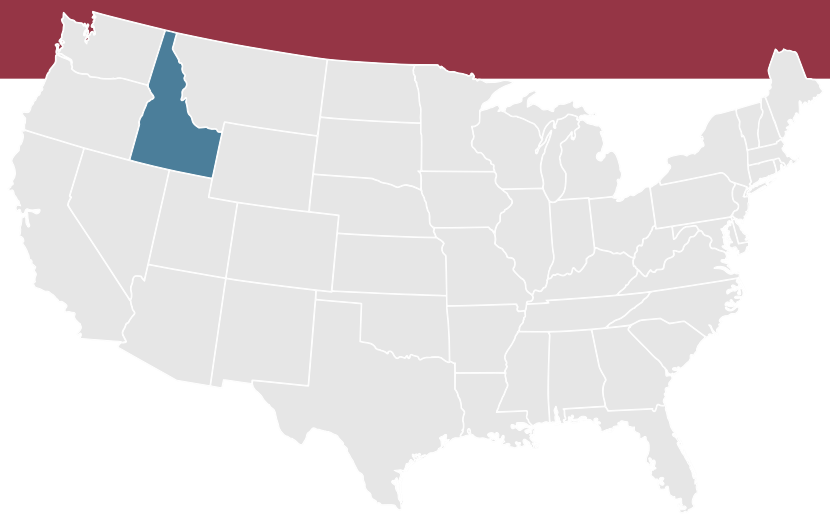


An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



Idaho

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?

Idaho’s plan is built on high-quality standards and assessments and a straightforward set of indicators, and the state is aspiring for greater transparency and intends to celebrate its highest-performing schools. Notably, the state attempts to provide multiple avenues to success through both current performance and improvement over time.

Idaho appears to have invested considerable effort into its school improvement plan, although its ultimate success will depend on implementation. The plan includes detailed descriptions of the types of resources that will be available to districts, such as an on-site review process and a comprehensive list of supports, but it will be up to districts to take advantage of them.

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

Idaho’s decision not to use a summative rating for schools, and the fact that schools will be held accountable for either achievement or growth on each indicator, could make it extremely challenging for parents to compare performance across schools. Moreover, Idaho’s chosen method for measuring growth does not actually track individual students over time, and a school could be given credit for making “growth” even if no individual students were actually making progress.

Additionally, it seems like Idaho missed a few opportunities to broaden the lens of what makes for a successful school. For example, while Idaho will test students in science and pays for all high school students to take the SAT, it does not plan to add those results to its school rating system. ESSA does not require states to include these measures, but both would appear to fit conceptually within Idaho’s proposed system.

Finally, although the plan includes a comprehensive list of optional supports, it does not appear that Idaho will employ the kind of transformative interventions that are likely necessary to turn around the very lowest-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?



Idaho aims to reduce the percentage of students who are not proficient by 33 percent over six years. The state proposes the same methodology for English language proficiency. For graduation rates, Idaho aims to reduce non-graduates by 75 percent over six years, with a 95 percent target within six years. It applies the same methodologies to other groups of students, resulting in more ambitious goals for groups that are currently lower performing.

While these aspirations seem reasonable and attainable, Idaho’s approach to goals raises some concerns. First, absent historical data, it is unclear whether or not these goals are ambitious or attainable. The state neither provides historical performance on the state assessment nor ties its goals to an objective bar (e.g., is having 61 percent of Idaho students proficient in mathematics in 2022 an indication of success? Does this mean more students are college and career ready?). The plan does include a statement that “had these goals been set in the 2015 school year, a substantial number of schools would have achieved their school-level goal in 2016,” but it’s difficult to tell what this means without more context. Second, the state says it will disaggregate performance for individual subgroups of students, but it has only provided goals for a large combined group of “minority” students, rather than breaking out targets for individual groups, such as African-American or Latino students.

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?



Idaho has a high-quality assessment system in grades 3-8 and 10, developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. The Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) includes both interim and summative assessments using a computer-adaptive process that results in a coherent and comprehensive system of assessment. It has already passed federal standards for validity and reliability. To measure English language proficiency, Idaho uses the WIDA ACCESS test, which is a popular and high-quality choice.

At the high school level, the state also pays for every student to take the SAT, but does not include this as part of its accountability system (it uses only the 10th-grade state assessment). In addition, the state administers a science assessment in grades 5 and 7, but this is not included as part of accountability. Idaho could consider incorporating both the SAT and science assessments as a way to broaden the scope of its accountability system.

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



While it appears that Idaho has chosen a straightforward list of indicators to include in its accountability system, there are concerns about how those indicators will be measured and whether they are all valid, reliable, and comparable statewide.

Elementary and middle schools will be held accountable for student proficiency rates in English and math, a measure of growth on those assessments, English language proficiency, and a student satisfaction and engagement survey. As discussed in more detail below, the “growth” measure Idaho is proposing does not actually measure individual student progress over time. And while Idaho’s student engagement survey may be useful as a diagnostic tool, it’s not clear from the information provided whether it has sufficient validity, reliability, and comparability to belong in a high-stakes accountability system. Once schools are held accountable for the results of the survey, there may be an incentive to be lenient with the scoring.

At the high school level, Idaho is proposing a similar list of indicators: proficiency in reading and math, English language proficiency, four-year graduation rate, “growth” in graduation rate, and college- and career-readiness indicators. While this is a relatively straightforward list, it may pose some unintended consequences for schools. For example, the graduation rate “growth” indicator may disproportionately reward lower-performing schools, especially since it appears to be equally weighted with the actual four-year graduation rate.

Similarly, while it is encouraging to see Idaho reward high schools for students who demonstrate college and career readiness through participating in advanced opportunities, earning industry-recognized certification, and/or participation in recognized high school apprenticeship programs, it’s unclear how these variables will be defined or if they’re all equally rigorous. Additionally, the plan indicates the denominator for this variable will be *graduating students*, which means it will omit students who did not graduate. Idaho would give schools a stronger incentive to ensure all students were ready for college and careers if it made this denominator based on *all students*.

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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Idaho plans to measure student achievement as the percentage of students performing on grade level (proficient). This is a clean, easy-to-understand measure of student achievement. However, unlike student-level growth models that hold schools accountable for increasing the performance of individual students over time, Idaho’s proposed measure only tracks year-over-year changes at the school level. This method is susceptible to differences in the student population enrolled in a given school in a given year. As such, a school’s performance on the growth indicator could improve (or decline) simply because the population served by the school is changing, not because of anything the school did to influence individual student performance.

Moreover, and as discussed further below, even if the state did have an individual growth model, the state’s methodology does not incentivize schools to care about both proficiency and growth. Idaho is planning to give full weight in its school identification system to *either* proficiency *or* growth. That is, schools will be ranked on both their achievement and growth scores, and then the measure used for their accountability rating will be the higher of the two rankings. This is particularly problematic given the way Idaho has structured its growth measure, because a school could be given credit for making “growth” even if no individual students were actually making annual progress. The opposite is true as well—schools with a high proficiency rating could maintain a high score even if their students failed to make progress over time.

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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To consider the performance of subgroups, Idaho will identify any school with a subgroup gap of 35 percentage points as compared to their non-group peers. However, it’s not clear if this comparison is within schools or a statewide comparison—the latter would be a stronger measure—and using gap closure as the definition runs the risk of keeping the bar low for historically underserved groups. Instead of setting the bar at a high level of achievement, it sets the bar based on comparison with their peers, who may not be achieving at high levels. And, as mentioned above, Idaho is planning to use a combined subgroup of “minority” students to run these calculations, and it has not provided a rationale for why it chose this 35 percent threshold. Similarly, the state will identify “additional targeted support” schools where any individual subgroup, on its own, would be identified for comprehensive support, but it has not yet provided data on how many schools this would capture.

Idaho has set its minimum n-size at 10 students, meaning any group with at least 10 students will be considered for accountability purposes. The state provides helpful data showing why it made this decision—this allows the state to capture more subgroups for more data elements, and thus creates a more statistically sound identification system. Idaho is also planning to use three years of data, which will further boost the inclusion of subgroups and help make the system less subject to one-year swings.

Idaho has also placed a substantial weight—30 percent in elementary and 22.5 percent in high school — on the performance of English learners. While the state’s desire to focus on English learners is understandable given their historically low achievement in Idaho, placing so much weight on this indicator could create perverse incentives. This is particularly problematic given that the state is still waiting on its latest results in order to finalize how the indicator would be measured or incorporated into the accountability system. Moreover, the state mentions just 6 percent of its students are English learners, and schools with concentrations of English learners will, in effect, have a very different accountability system than the majority of schools in the state.

Finally, Idaho’s approach to the 95 percent participation requirement is concerning. If a school fails to meet the threshold in a given year, participation can also be calculated with a three-year average, which is not in keeping with the spirit of this policy. Perhaps more importantly, the sanction for not meeting the requirement—the development of an outreach plan—may be insufficient to ensure high participation across all schools.

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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Idaho intends to identify “schools for improvement only if they are both the lowest performing in the state and not improving.” Idaho will turn each of its variables into statewide rankings of both current-year performance and improvement over time, and then use only the higher of the two ranks. That is, if a school scores well overall but exhibits low growth on the measure, it will get credit for its overall high score and not be penalized for a lack of growth. On the other end, a school with large improvements but low absolute performance will be scored based on its improvements and not its low overall performance. While Idaho is attempting to balance a school’s current status as well as its improvement over time, this approach has a few drawbacks.

First, because the state has elected to use a dashboard rather than a summative rating, it will be difficult for parents (whose children are not attending a school identified for comprehensive or targeted support) to determine how a given school is performing, and how its performance compares with other schools. Idaho should consider what steps it will take to ensure that the dashboards are parent-friendly and provide actionable information for all stakeholders.

Second, allowing schools to choose between either achievement or growth may run counter to ESSA, which requires states to design accountability systems that are comparable statewide.

Idaho's plan for identifying schools for comprehensive support is based on a relative ranking of all schools across the state. It will identify the bottom 5 percent of schools and will identify K-8, high schools, and alternative schools separately (which will protect against certain grade spans having systematically higher or lower scores). The state will also identify for comprehensive support high schools with graduation rates below 67 percent based on four-year cohort graduation rates, averaged over three years. Other than the graduation rate rule, schools will be ranked relative to one another, and it would be possible for a school to escape scrutiny simply because other schools perform worse.

As mentioned above, Idaho's approach to identifying schools with low-performing subgroups appears to be oriented around schools with large within-school gaps. This method should help identify places with large within-school gaps, but it may not identify schools with lower overall performance and especially low-performing subgroups.

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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Idaho's plan describes a comprehensive statewide system of supports for identified schools. However, it's not clear whether the list of supports will be sufficiently rigorous to turn around the lowest-performing schools. The plan includes detailed descriptions of the types of resources that will be available to districts, but it will be up to districts to take advantage of them.

As part of the state's system of support, all comprehensive improvement schools will conduct a needs assessment and develop an improvement plan based on the results. Those plans must "address the why, who, what, when, and resource allocation for making improvement changes" and articulate short- and long-term goals. The plan must include external stakeholders in the development process and during implementation. Districts must also address how they will monitor and oversee the improvement plan's implementation, as well as how its effectiveness will be evaluated.

For schools that fail to improve for three years after being flagged as in need of improvement, Idaho will conduct an on-site visit using a structured protocol that results in a set of recommendations. The state may also direct some of the district's spending and assign a leadership coach to the school district. Idaho's statewide system of support includes diagnostic needs assessments, school improvement coaching, mentoring and support for principals, training on the state's content standards, support for English learners, and technical assistance on usage of school time and engagement with families and the community.

These first steps, particularly the on-site review and comprehensive supports, are likely necessary—but not sufficient—to turn around the lowest-performing schools and subgroups. Idaho mentions that its school improvement team will work with school districts to ensure their interventions are evidence-based, but it does not articulate what this would mean in practice. The state plans to distribute the 7 percent of its Title I funds dedicated to school improvement through a formula, which will limit the ability of the state to push districts toward more rigorous interventions. To further strengthen its plan, Idaho should indicate if and how it intends to provide direct student services using the optional 3 percent set-aside, which provides an additional 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?



Idaho’s plan calls for a three-year timeline for schools that are identified. Specifically, a school in support status can exit if (1) it no longer meets the criteria that resulted in initial identification, (2) it shows a “consistent growth trajectory,” and (3) it submits a written plan as to how the school will sustain success without additional funding. A school can exit early (but forfeit funds) if it is on track to hit its three-year target.

The state’s relative ranking system—and lack of an objective bar—raises concern that a school that performs marginally better than those in the state’s bottom 5 percent will lose necessary attention and supports to be able to escape scrutiny. Instead, Idaho could strengthen its plan by requiring each low-performing school to meet a rigorous, objective bar, such as meeting its interim goals for two to three years, before exiting to ensure that schools do not bounce in and out of 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?



Idaho’s plan often cites stakeholder engagement and buy-in in the initial development, including how to define an appropriate subgroup size, how to set performance targets, and in its school identification approach. The state does deserve credit for embedding stakeholder feedback in its school improvement planning processes.

Districts with low-performing schools must include the principal, teachers, and parents, in the development and implementation of school improvement plans. Additionally, districts must articulate how they plan to monitor and oversee the plan's implementation, and how they will evaluate the effectiveness of the plan over time.

However, it's not entirely clear who the state consulted in the plan-writing process or what that engagement process looked like, not to mention what happens moving forward with regard to learning and adjusting as the plan is implemented. At the state level, while Idaho is transitioning to more of a hands-off approach toward schools, it will be important for the state to remain vigilant in monitoring and supporting the schools that have historically struggled. It would be helpful for the state to develop a list of key stakeholder groups and organizations that can be part of an ongoing feedback cycle and inform implementation of this plan.