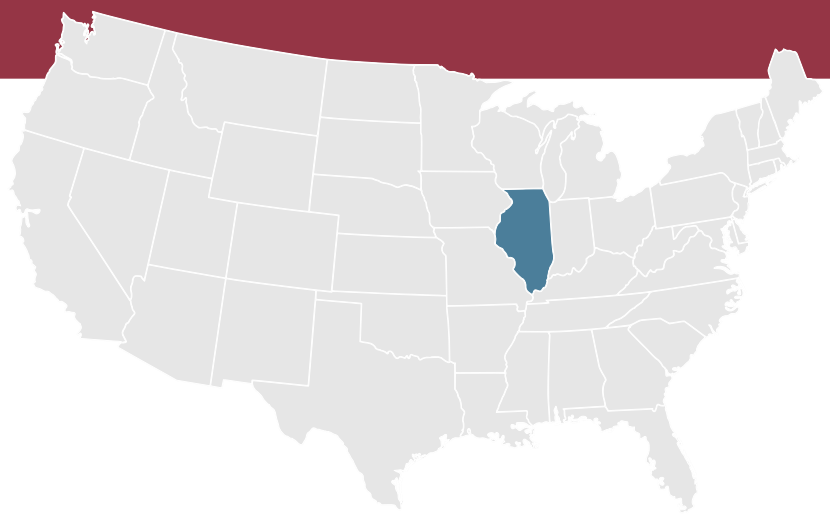


An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



Illinois

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?

Illinois has proposed a clear rationale for its K-12 goals, with a close alignment to its postsecondary attainment goal. In linking K-12 goals to an external benchmark such as postsecondary attainment goals, the state can bring coherence across multiple systems and ensure that there is shared ownership for students from K-12 to postsecondary education and training. This is a potential model for other states.

Illinois has clearly sought out and respected the feedback from its stakeholder groups. Throughout its plan, it cites specific feedback as an explanation for why it adopted particular approaches as well as dissenting opinions. It seems Illinois understood that ESSA is focused on giving states more flexibility to address the needs of the whole child and to shift accountability from purely pass/fail to supporting continuous improvement.

In addition, Illinois continues to prioritize academic performance in its accountability system, while keeping open the possibility of an early learning indicator as well as one for fine arts. It’s a creative approach that’s worth watching. The state’s unique process for reporting on students who exit special education and English-language learner status is also noteworthy.

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

Illinois’ plan lacks details or a strong rationale in some areas. For example, its calculation for student growth is confusing, and by weighting growth twice as much as proficiency, it may over-emphasize growth at the expense of grade-level proficiency. Illinois could also strengthen its plan by developing a more rigorous method for identifying and supporting schools with low-performing subgroups of students. Moreover, while stakeholder support is important, it appears that different perspectives and priorities have not always been reconciled into one cohesive plan.

Finally, the state’s proposed intervention system may be insufficient to the task of rehabilitating the state’s lowest-performing schools. The state’s approach to intervention is vague and lacks any real urgency for improvement. Coupled with a protracted timeline, Illinois’ approach could allow schools to stagnate rather than improve. These issues could be addressed by providing a plan with concrete tactics and a broader array of tools in addressing Illinois’ most distressed 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?



Illinois has articulated a vision of “whole, healthy children nestled in whole, healthy systems,” and it cites stakeholder buy-in for the vision. The state has also established an overarching goal of having 60 percent of Illinoisans with a high-quality degree or postsecondary credential by 2025. This part of the plan could serve as a model for other states. It is clear that the vision and mission of the state board drove the development of the ESSA plan and not the other way around.

Specifically, Illinois outlines a series of long-term goals that expect 90 percent of students to meet expectations by 2032 (i.e., third-graders reading on level, fifth-graders proficient in math, ninth-graders on track to graduate, high school graduation/college and career ready). These milestones are intended to align with the state’s postsecondary attainment goal, which is a strong aspiration. An intentional alignment between K-12 and higher education goals should be a model for other states. In addition, Illinois maintains the same goal for all subgroups, which sends a message that the state has high expectations for every student.

Illinois has also articulated a reasonable method for using a growth-to-target model for setting interim student-level goals for English-language acquisition. The state is waiting for more current data on English language proficiency, and in the meantime has provided placeholder goals that it plans to update in the near future.

Finally, Illinois’ long-term goals for its five- and six-year graduation rates are the same as its four-year rate (90 percent). With additional time, more students should graduate. The state could strengthen its plan by setting higher goals for its extended-year rates than its four-year rate.

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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Illinois adopted the Common Core State Standards in 2010, and Illinois has a high-quality assessment system in grades 3-8 through the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). The state also mentions that it is using the Dynamic Learning Maps-Alternate Assessment for students in grades 3-8 with severe cognitive impairments.

At the high school level, Illinois is using the SAT as its accountability assessment. That choice has pros and cons. On one hand, the SAT is familiar to students and families, and it is recognized at colleges all across the country. On the other hand, absent an independent review, we don’t yet know whether the SAT is fully aligned to the state’s academic standards. And, without the ability to use accommodations and submit valid scores, some of the key benefits of using the SAT may not extend fully to all students.

Illinois also deserves credit for including its science assessment in its accountability system, which will help address concerns about curriculum narrowing. Although science represents a nominal addition to its accountability system (5 percent beginning in 2019-20), this decision signals schools to pay attention to student performance beyond reading and math.

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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Illinois has chosen a logical set of indicators to include in its accountability system (academic proficiency, growth, chronic absenteeism, climate surveys, and English-learner proficiency) as well as an on-track indicator for ninth-graders (based on their accumulated credits and grades). All of these indicators are strongly research-based and actionable. Overall, Illinois’ system emphasizes academic performance, with 75 percent of the weight placed on academic proficiency and growth. In fact, 50 percent of Illinois’ system is based on academic growth. However, it is important to note that the calculation for growth is not well-defined in grades 3-8, and academic growth in high school cannot be determined with the state’s current assessments. In the meantime, the state’s proxy for growth in high school is a measure of student retention, and there are questions about labeling it as a measure of “growth.”

At the high school level, Illinois could strengthen its plan by placing a stronger emphasis on the four-year graduation rate. As currently drafted, the state’s plan appears to use an aggregate graduation rate composed of the average of the four-, five-, and six-year rates, which would inflate graduation rates and dilute the value of completing in four years.

However, Illinois deserves credit for incorporating both college and career readiness into its high school system. It provides multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate their readiness for college and careers, such as course-taking, assessments, and co-curricular experiences, and its emphasis on all students engaging in college and career opportunities should be commended and replicated by other states. While this is already a strong indicator, it could be improved. For instance, the states could provide greater detail about the definition of “quality” for the “career” measures and potentially place greater emphasis on externally validated measures (i.e., exams) over course grades. The state’s plan could also provide more information about its pathway endorsement and college remedial coursework measures. As data become available, the state should analyze the extent to which students who met the benchmarks ultimately enrolled and demonstrated success in postsecondary education and training.

Illinois is proposing to weight the English-language proficiency indicator at 5 percent, which is lower than other states. However, Illinois specifically notes that it will include all K–12 English-language learners in this indicator, which is an innovative idea. It goes beyond ESSA’s requirement, which only asks states to use English-language proficiency scores from grades 3–8 and once in high school.

Moreover, Illinois is exploring the addition of a fine arts indicator, which seems to align with the state’s desire to educate the “whole child.” The weight of this indicator, which will be based on the percentage of students enrolled in a fine arts course, will be determined when more data are available.

Illinois has also proposed two additional school-quality indicators for the elementary level, which will be studied and considered by the end of this calendar year. Notably, Illinois deserves credit for considering an indicator focused on pre-k through second grade, reflecting the state’s desire to recognize the importance of early learning.

While these are all potentially promising individually, the state needs to be cautious about incorporating too many indicators. In fact, the state’s plan is already lacking in evidence that its proposed indicators provide uniquely valuable information on school performance, and it could be strengthened by adding that additional information.

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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Illinois has placed a heavy emphasis on student growth in its accountability system, giving growth a weight of 50 percent of the total (the largest single weighting of any measure). And although assessments are not yet available at the secondary level, Illinois deserves credit for aspiring to maintain an emphasis on growth in the high school grades as well.

However, the state should be careful not to place too much emphasis on growth. The state is proposing to weight growth twice as much as proficiency, and in future years it may count student proficiency at only 7.5 percent in each content area. This approach is concerning, because it may take away emphasis on grade-level performance and be hard to convey to the public, particularly as the state transitions from older accountability systems focused primarily on proficiency to a new one with such a larger growth emphasis.

In addition, the state’s plan lacks detail around the specific method it plans to use to calculate student growth. The term “simple linear regression” is used throughout, but it is not explained more than comparing last year’s test scores with current scores. Will that analysis be done at the student or school level? And how will that information be used to identify school-level performance?

Because Illinois does not yet have enough data to determine if these measures and accompanying weighting will identify the neediest schools, it may be more prudent to consider a phase-in/phase-out approach between proficiency and growth, analogous to how the state plans to weight English-language arts and math proficiency and science proficiency. This is especially important given the amount of emphasis the state is placing on academic growth.

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?



Illinois has proposed a strong policy that a school may not receive the top two designations (exemplary or commendable) if it has a consistently underperforming subgroup. This should be considered by other states as a way of safeguarding against student subgroups being hidden under averages or summative grades.

However, without seeing any numbers on how it will play out in Illinois, it is concerning that the state’s definition of “consistently underperforming” subgroups may set a very low bar, because its definition focuses only on groups performing at the bottom 5 percent of the state. This means that schools may continue to maintain significant gaps, so long as subgroup performance does not fall below the bottom 5 percent.

The state’s unique strategy of identifying separate subgroups of former students with disabilities and former English-language learners (as well as current students with disabilities and ELLs) and reporting on their progress is worthy of replication by other states. Including these individuals as their own group will allow educators and policymakers to easily see how those students perform after they are no longer receiving services.

The state’s n-size for reporting (10) and accountability (20) are appropriate for balancing the needs of privacy and transparency, but the plan’s approach to the 95 percent participation requirement is concerning, as it really pertains only to schools rated in the top category (i.e., the top 10 percent of schools in the state) and to those that miss the target for three consecutive years. The state might consider additional ways to incorporate a measure to prevent intermittent missing of the requirement, such as examining whether a school missed the 95 percent threshold in three of the last five years.

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?



The state’s approach to identifying schools could be improved. First, the proposed system for classification is potentially misleading, and the state may want to work with parent stakeholder groups to make sure its proposed color-coding system aligns with school performance levels.

Additionally, the state proposes an unnecessarily generous statistical protection for schools. By rating schools on either a single year of data or a three-year rolling average, whichever is higher, that has the effect of creating an artificial floor for schools. That is, schools would get the upside of a wildly divergent positive result, but they’d be protected against any downswings. That rule would also negate the rationale for including the three-year average at all, which is to minimize year-to-year volatility. Something like this proposal would fit better in the exit criteria section, where Illinois should be looking for signs of progress, than in the identification system itself.

In addition, as noted above, it is concerning that the state’s identification of schools with consistently underperforming students is limited to schools with a subgroup performing at the bottom 5 percent. This meets the bare-minimum requirement of the law, but Illinois should consider developing an additional definition of “consistently underperforming” subgroup and identify/support these schools as well. Also, it is unclear what designation would be given to schools that do not receive Title I funding, and what, if any, support will be provided.

Finally, Illinois’ plan would be much stronger if it actually modeled out what its choices would mean for schools (the state should use existing data to begin that process and not wait until three years of data are available). Although its plan appears well-founded at the descriptive level, it won’t be until Illinois starts applying its decisions that it will know whether it is accomplishing its desired objectives.

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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Illinois has a fairly generic plan to support schools, and it hinges much of its plan on the IL-Empower system. The state plans to approve external providers and the prices they can charge schools, but it’s not exactly clear how the state will determine if low-performing schools are choosing interventions that are truly evidence-based. The state’s plan provides very little detail about its needs assessment/equity audit tool, approach for ensuring evidence-based practices, or plan for intervening in schools that do not demonstrate adequate improvement (or those that have not shown that improvement to date). The state’s plan could be improved if it provided more detail about how the state intends to provide (or work with districts to provide) more opportunities for advanced coursework and career experiences, especially for traditionally underserved students.

In particular, Illinois’ use of IL-Empower also appears problematic for several reasons. First, schools that use it will need to self-identify areas for improvement even though these schools would seem to be the least likely to have the wherewithal to do so. Second, schools have four years to improve (i.e., a planning year plus three years for implementation); the rationale provided for the long time horizon is stakeholder recommendation.

Under IL-Empower, schools and districts (i.e., “exemplary” and “commendable”) are eligible to serve as providers and receive funding to do so. This could be promising, but it raises a host of logistical issues.

Notably, Illinois states that a “lowest performing” school would not be able to remain in the network indefinitely. The state would then work with the school to identify any necessary supports or resources, but the plan does not identify any specific actions that schools would be required to pursue or approaches that have proved to be effective in the past. Although it might run counter to the premium Illinois places on collaboration, community, and consensus, the state would do well to beef up its approach with its most distressed schools.

The state appears to be planning to issue all of its money for school-improvement funds, 7 percent of its Title I funding, through a formula rather than running a competition to identify the most promising district plans. It does not specify the formula it plans to use or how it will ensure this money is well spent. The state should consider using a competition to ensure funds are used to support high-quality plans. In addition, Illinois should consider using the 3 percent Direct Student Services set-aside to reinforce school-improvement efforts.

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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Illinois should be commended for having three areas of focus within its exit criteria; however, the lack of specifics within two of these criteria is a cause for concern. Another point of concern is that the plan indicates the criteria are “proposed” and potentially still in development.

The first criterion is that schools would simply no longer have to be identified for the list. This may not be sufficient to demonstrate real, sustained progress. By failing to identify numeric targets in advance, the state is not providing schools with sufficient information about what they need to do in order to demonstrate satisfactory progress.

The state should be commended for proposing a requirement that schools develop a sustainability plan prior to exiting their identification status, although this language is still somewhat vague. In addition, the state should be commended for requiring a growth trajectory as part of the state’s exit status. For this to be effective, it is necessary for the state to set specific targets and timelines in advance.

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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Illinois has articulated a number of places where it plans to monitor implementation over time and make changes accordingly. For example, its plan to add new indicators into its accountability system over time suggests a commitment to continuous improvement, as does its plan to monitor specific indicators already included in the system (specifically the way it will be measuring student growth).

The state appears committed to continuing to seek stakeholder feedback. It might be helpful to develop some sort of overarching stakeholder group that provides feedback and helps the state make decisions on the impact of the accountability system on school, district, and classroom practice at regular intervals as the system is implemented.

For example, Illinois’ plan describes its support for local efforts at continuous improvement, but it is heavy on state monitoring and light on concrete tactics. If IL-Empower does not lead to school improvements, the state did not identify any other strategies for supporting low-performing schools.