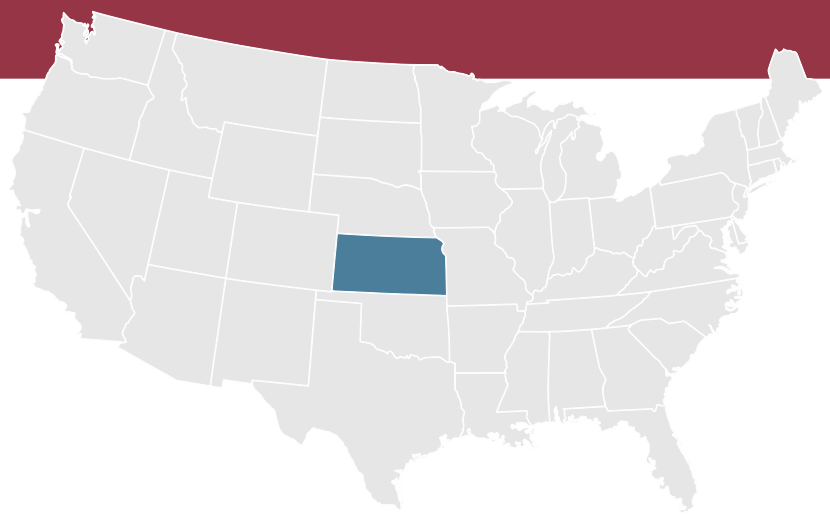


An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



Kansas

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?

Although it currently is under review, Kansas’ system is built on high-quality academic standards, and the plan provides evidence that the state’s assessments are aligned with college and career readiness. To meet those standards, the state sets forth ambitious goals that are the same for every subgroup.

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

Overall, Kansas’ plan does not provide sufficient information and evidence to clearly communicate and how it will improve education in the state. Furthermore, Kansas’ accountability system could be very confusing, and the state should work to simplify and align the system across the different component parts. Kansas should also consider how to more clearly incorporate subgroup performance, measure individual student growth, combine indicators into a rating system, and identify schools for improvement. Kansas’ strategies for school improvement—particularly for schools that do not improve after identification—are very limited and carry significant risk that these schools could continue without making dramatic changes commensurate with their needs.

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?



Kansas puts forth a broad, but compelling, vision to prepare students “for lifelong success through rigorous, quality academic instruction, career training, and character development according to each student’s gifts and talents.” The state further clarifies its vision by specifying the definition of a successful high school graduate and five key outcomes to measure progress toward realizing that vision.

Kansas set long-term goals of 75 percent proficiency and a 95 percent graduation rate by 2030 for all subgroups, which appear ambitious given the state’s baseline, but it is not clear if they are attainable. It is also not clear why Kansas chose these goals or how they relate to the rest of the accountability system. While it is admirable that Kansas set the same goal for all subgroups of students, absent additional data, the level of progress the state is asking of the lowest-performing subgroups seems unlikely.

For English language proficiency, the goal is that by 2030, 95 percent of students will show progress toward proficiency. The state will use “speed to proficiency” to measure the progress of English learners in attaining English language proficiency starting in 2022. Until the “speed to proficiency” measure is determined and new interim goals established, Kansas will use “progress toward proficiency” to determine if English learners are making progress in attaining English.

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?



Kansas uses a version of the Common Core State Standards, which are aligned to college- and career-readiness expectations. However, the state recently revised its standards. The revised math and English language arts standards will be implemented beginning in July 2018, so it is difficult to assess now whether the revised standards will be high quality and rigorous.

For now, Kansas' assessments appear to be aligned to the current standards. The plan notes that the state worked with the ACT to align the state cut scores to the ACT. Since secondary students take the exam in 10th grade, this alignment will allow students and parents to see if students are on track for attaining an ACT score in 12th grade indicating they are ready for postsecondary study and do not need remediation. There is a concern that there is no mention in the plan of whether or not the state has addressed the alignment of ACT's college- and career-readiness standards to Kansas' previous or new standards. Additionally, it is unclear if the state provides sufficient accommodations on those tests to English language learners and students with disabilities. That said, it appears as though Kansas uses high-quality alternate assessments and English language proficiency assessments.

In Kansas, 9 percent of its student population are English learners whose native language is Spanish. The state provides an assessment feature in which key academic words can be translated into Spanish. The plan could be strengthened by providing full translations of the assessment rather than only key word translations. The state also has videos to accompany assessments in American Sign Language. The state's plan could be improved by providing information about its plans to support languages other than Spanish and by describing its accommodations for students with disabilities.

Finally, Kansas could strengthen its plan by providing more information about its alternate achievement standards and aligned assessments for students with the most severe cognitive disabilities, including how the state will ensure that it will meet the 1 percent cap on alternate assessments.

The state's plan would be stronger if it included consequences for schools that miss the 95 percent participation threshold, overall or for particular subgroups. Kansas will identify schools that miss the requirement for two consecutive years, but it is unclear why waiting two years is necessary and whether ongoing technical assistance is sufficient to identify and improve a school that misses this requirement. A more meaningful 95 percent participation provision would help preserve the integrity of the state's accountability system and ensure that all students are represented equitably.

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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Overall, Kansas does not provide sufficient details about the few indicators it chose or how they will be measured. These indicators will not be combined into a summative rating. Instead, for each indicator, schools and districts will receive a designation as not meeting, meeting, or exceeding expectation, but it is not clear how those determinations are used.

The state includes academic proficiency in mathematics and English language arts, graduation rates, English language proficiency, a measure of gap closure for schools with the lowest-performing students and subgroups, and an indicator designed to incentivize schools to reduce the percentage of students scoring at the lowest performance levels on their state assessments.

For non-high schools, Kansas elected to use a gap measure in English language arts and mathematics. This indicator measures whether schools increase the performance of students who are 1.5 standard deviations below the mean at the district, school, and subgroup levels. The goal is for those students to reach the 1.5 standard deviation threshold. While Kansas should be commended for focusing on the lowest-performing students, the goal of reaching 1.5 standard deviations below average may be setting too low of a bar and may not be easily understandable for educators and parents.

As its school quality indicator, Kansas will measure the percentage of students scoring at the Academic Performance Indicator levels 1 and 2. The long-term goal is to have 5 percent or fewer students score at those levels by 2030. The baseline data will be 2017 and the first reporting on this indicator will occur in 2018. Determinations will be made for each subgroup, and all will have the same long-term goal, which means that lower-performing subgroups will have steeper interim goals.

It also appears Kansas is using chronic absenteeism, suspensions, and expulsions, although these indicators are not clearly defined or sufficiently explained.

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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For its student achievement indicator, Kansas will use a performance index that gives schools credit for students performing at higher levels. While this will help encourage schools to move students up along the performance continuum, it is not a measure of student-level growth. As a part of its performance indicator, the state does include a measure that tracks student performance across the eight performance bands on the state assessments. The ultimate goal is to decrease the percentage of students scoring at levels 1 and 2. Points are awarded to students based on their performance band. The state's plan could be improved by including a specific measure of student 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?

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It does not appear that Kansas will be incorporating subgroup scores into the state's A+ school rating system, which the state uses to identify comprehensive support schools. Instead, the state plans to identify just 5 percent of schools with low-performing subgroups as in need of targeted support, contrary to ESSA's requirement that states must identify a school with *any* low-performing subgroup as a school in need of targeted support and improvement.

The state should consider strengthening its plan and more closely aligning it with ESSA's goal of ensuring that all schools with low-performing groups of students are identified and supported.

Kansas uses its gap measure to identify low-performing subgroups. However, this measure could be improved by requiring the lowest-performing subgroups to make more progress rather than only reaching the performance of 1.5 standard deviations below the mean for the all-students category.

Finally, Kansas is planning to require a school to have 30 students in a subgroup before it counts for accountability purposes. There did not appear to be any data on the impact of choosing this number. Furthermore, this n-size is significantly high and could mask the performance of smaller subgroups.

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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Kansas' school identification system is unclear and difficult to understand. The plan does not specify how exactly the state would incorporate its Academic Performance Index, which rates and combines students' performance, with its other indicators to form its A+ school rating system.

Every three years the state will identify the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools based 60 percent on academic performance on English language arts and mathematics, while the other 40 percent will come from chronic absenteeism and the percentage of students suspended or expelled. Additionally, high schools with graduation rates of less than 67 percent will be identified, as will targeted support and improvement schools that fail to show progress in closing gaps. In this case, the state should clarify the progress necessary to demonstrate sufficient gap closure.

Without accounting directly for subgroup performance and without a student-level growth measure that is pegged to proficiency or college and career readiness, it is not clear whether the schools most in need will be identified. Kansas does identify schools with low subgroup performance compared to the state average, but it is not clear how many schools will be identified using the state’s methodology or what the characteristics of these schools will be.

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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Kansas’ strategy appears to be entirely focused on the Kansas Learning Network and providing technical assistance. Without information about the KLN, it is hard to see how technical assistance alone will provide the intervention and support necessary to turn around the lowest-performing schools in the state. Kansas does say that the KLN will assist with evidence-based interventions, which is promising, but there is no description of how this will work. Kansas also does not intend to provide any more rigorous interventions for schools that continue to struggle. Furthermore, the state does not clearly describe how it plans to award the 7 percent set-aside of its Title I funds for school improvement activities. Additionally, the state 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.

In its plan, the state only provides a limited description of vague and overly general interventions and technical assistance. According to its plan, the state developed a coordinated system of technical assistance for comprehensive and targeted support and improvement schools. There are also on-site visits from state teams. For schools that fail to exit comprehensive support status after three years, the only intervention provided is additional technical assistance to the school. The district will also receive technical assistance focused on system changes and supports, but no details for this assistance are provided.

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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While Kansas has provided exit criteria that contain a number of important elements to show meaningful, sustained improvements, the actual criteria articulated are still vague and undefined. Schools only must maintain their improvement plan, spend funds according to their plan, and make an unspecified amount of progress.

Schools identified for comprehensive support can exit after two years of working with the Kansas Learning Network. To exit, schools and districts must maintain an improvement plan; demonstrate that their school improvement funds were used for evidence-based interventions; show improvement on chronic absenteeism, suspensions, and expulsions; and show progress on English language arts and mathematics. However, the state does not define what would constitute requisite progress, which leaves school leaders in the dark about what they need to accomplish to demonstrate success.

Those schools identified for comprehensive support due to a low graduation rate have the same exit criteria but must also show progress on graduation rates. As above, the state does not define what sufficient progress would entail.

Targeted support schools will remain as identified for three years but are eligible to apply to exit after two. To exit, a school or district must maintain a school improvement plan; provide evidence that they took advantage of technical assistance opportunities; and provide data showing that they’re closing gaps for subgroups that were identified. Again, the necessary improvement actually required to exit this status is undefined.

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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Kansas’ plan does not provide much information regarding its continuous improvement efforts. The state should make clear how it will make adjustments and improvements to its ESSA plan and also identify structures and strategies to engage with stakeholders and take their feedback into consideration as it revises its plan over the next few years. Those processes will be especially important given the potential changes to Kansas’ standards and assessments in the coming years.