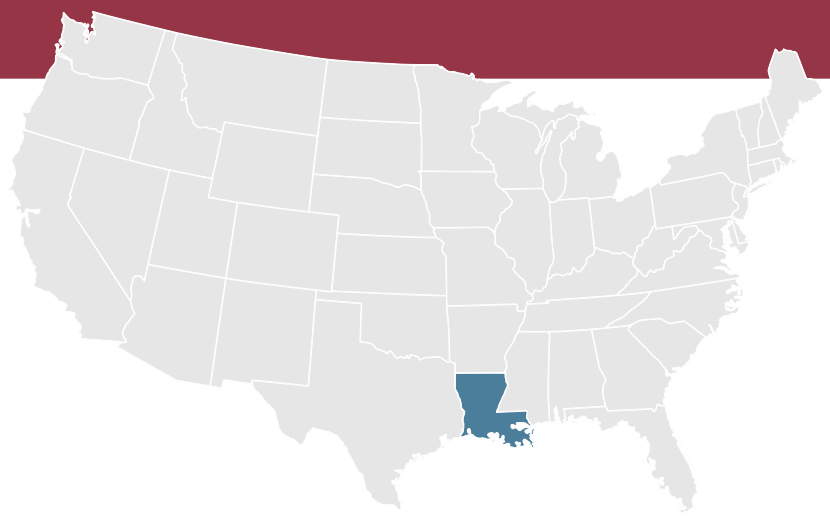


An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



Louisiana

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?

Louisiana has a high-quality plan that presents a strong vision for students in the state, and it sets high expectations for results. The state’s plan is grounded in strong standards and assessments, it places a strong emphasis on academic proficiency and growth, and its clearly defined school-rating system will ensure that stakeholders, schools, and students will have a clear understanding of how schools are serving all children. Louisiana’s inclusion of science and social studies assessments is a strong element of its plan, and it has compiled a novel set of measures to assess high school and college readiness. The state’s plan goes well beyond the minimal federal requirement to identify low-performing schools, and the state has shown an impressive commitment to significantly raising its expectations over time.

Louisiana’s school-improvement model is easy to understand and is coupled with clear timelines and expectations for improvement, and the state’s willingness to take over schools and direct dramatic school-improvement efforts through its Recovery School District authority is another significant strength of Louisiana’s plan.

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

There’s some concern that Louisiana does not do enough to flag schools with subgroups of students who are not well served by the school. It does not specifically include student subgroup scores in its statewide A-F grading system, and, although it will pick up a number of “targeted support” schools on the back end, there’s a risk that parents and educators will pay more attention to the overall grade than the targeted support flag. The state’s plan also may not adequately address schools with low-performing student groups that remain low performing over long periods of time, and its exit criteria for targeted support schools could allow schools to exit improvement status after only minor improvements in subgroup scores.

The state could also add specificity on how it will respond to some of the challenges it identifies. For example, the state proposes to identify 43 percent of its schools as in need of “Urgent Intervention” for students with disabilities (see below for more details), but it does not articulate a detailed plan for how it will respond to that challenge.

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?



Louisiana outlines an ambitious vision and attainable goals backed by clear data and a strong rationale supporting its interim targets. The state is proposing to sustain its recent gains (a goal in and of itself) and annually increase its proficiency rates by 2.5 percentage points per year from 2018–2025.

Louisiana has set the same final target for all groups of students, and it expects faster progress for groups that are starting further behind. Similarly, the state has made strong gains over time in boosting high school graduation rates, and it aims to continue that progress through at least 2025.

Louisiana is also to be commended for increasing standards and expectations even as the plan is being implemented. The accountability system will adjust “ambitiously and cautiously” in order to set high expectations up front while giving time for schools to ramp up to meet them.

Louisiana 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.

However, the state is planning to allow individual students seven years to attain English-language proficiency, which may be too long, particularly since the state provides data suggesting that the average student has historically made it in only four years.

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?



Louisiana fully implemented college- and career-ready standards in 2014, and then adjustments made through stakeholder input led to the adoption of new Louisiana State Standards for the 2016–17 school year. Louisiana should be commended for designing its system with the intent of ensuring that expectations for an A-rated school in Louisiana are consistent with expectations for all such schools nationwide.

The state has also built incentives for schools to accelerate students and to emphasize subjects beyond reading and math. For example, Louisiana will reward schools that get more students into Algebra 1 by eighth grade, and it will test high school students in science and history in addition to reading and math.

The state has a long track record using its current state assessments, the LEAP, and the state’s high school end-of-course tests. In addition, the state requires all high school juniors to take the ACT, which allows all students to take a college-ready entrance exam. However, the state does not provide much information about the accommodations that are available for English learners and students with disabilities, particularly for the ACT and WorkKeys. Without the ability to use accommodations and submit valid scores, some of the key benefits of using the ACT may not extend fully to all students. The state indicates that it translates its mathematic assessments to Spanish, but it does not explain why other assessments are not translated as well.

Finally, the state should provide the steps it will take to ensure that the state does not exceed the 1 percent cap on participation in the alternate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

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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Louisiana has proposed a small but high-quality list of indicators focused on academic achievement and success. The state deserves credit for including achievement not just in English-language arts and math but also history and science, which will help address concerns about curriculum narrowing. To provide schools with a strong incentive to care about participation rates, schools will earn zero points on the test-based indicators for students who do not participate in statewide assessments.. The state has also proposed innovative, age-appropriate measures for middle and high schools that incorporate measures beyond test results.

However, Louisiana does not yet have a separate “school quality or student success” indicator for elementary schools (it proposes to add a promising “Interests and Opportunities” indicator in 2019–2020). In the meantime, Louisiana could consider separating its two growth models to comply with this indicator, or it could incorporate something like chronic absenteeism, which ESSA requires the state to report anyway and which has been linked to long-term academic and nonacademic outcomes.

In other grade spans, the state has developed innovative academic measures. The Dropout Credit Accumulation Index for middle schools will measure credit accumulation through the end of ninth grade and is designed to measure how well middle schools prepare students for high school. It will create an incentive for schools to work on middle school and high school alignment, and to make sure students are ready for success at the next level. (Louisiana may want to take a similar approach to high schools to ensure that it is truly preparing students to be successful in college or careers.)

For high schools, the state includes a promising “Strength of Diploma” measure that gives schools credit for helping more of their graduates taking and passing AP/IB/CLEP tests, earning college credit through dual-enrollment courses, earning industry credentials, or completing other types of high school diplomas. This is a smart way for the state to encourage more students to complete more advanced diplomas, but the state should monitor its data to ensure it is creating strong incentives and not giving credit for low-level inputs. It will also be important for the state to track *which* students are pursuing which options, particularly for English learners and students with disabilities, who might be inappropriately pushed toward alternative diplomas.

Finally, while the state is clearly attempting to measure performance across a broad spectrum, it risks overemphasizing the highest levels of performance at the expense of masking other students. On its assessment index, a hypothetical school with two-thirds of its students at Advanced (Level 5) and one-third at Unsatisfactory (Level 1) would earn the same number of points as a school with all of its students at Mastery (Level 4). Louisiana’s index for high school students, based on performance on ACT or WorkKeys, has a similar incentive structure. Although the above example may be extreme, Louisiana should monitor its data to ensure that it is appropriately balancing higher-level performance with its grade-level expectations.

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?



Louisiana has created strong incentives for schools to care about proficiency and growth. Louisiana places strong overall weight on academic achievement (50-70 percent of a school’s rating, depending on the grade level) and growth (12.5–25 percent). Louisiana is unique in that its testing schedule allows it to measure growth in high schools, whereas most states are not able to measure student growth after middle school.

The state’s achievement measure awards points on a graduated scale that gives students credit for reaching higher levels of performance (although, as discussed above, the state may be giving disproportionate weight to the highest levels). The state is planning to combine English-language proficiency into this assessment index on a proportional basis (where a school with a higher concentration of English learners would have a larger share of its grade based on English-language proficiency). This is an innovative idea, but some peers indicated they would like to see the state include a separate indicator with a fixed weight.

Louisiana has also proposed an innovative way to measure student academic growth that incorporates both whether the student is on track to mastery and whether he or she is growing faster or slower than peers. It will give all students a clear, transparent individual growth target that would put them on track for mastery by eighth grade. Students who meet their target earn full points. If students fail to meet those targets, they earn

partial credit based on how much growth they demonstrate in comparison with similar students. For this latter measure, Louisiana may want to consider using a continuous scale rather than bucketing students into broad categories. For example, students showing growth at the 60th percentile would earn 30 more points than students at the 59th percentile, even though those students are quite similar.

Finally, Louisiana deserves credit for issuing informational letter grades separately for growth and achievement, further increasing transparency and perhaps demystifying what growth looks like at a school level.

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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Louisiana deserves credit for using a low subgroup threshold of 10 students, which helps identify more students in the accountability system. The state does not include a separate weighting for disaggregated subgroup performance in its A–F grading system, but it has created back-end checks to ensure that schools are addressing the needs of very low-performing groups of students. Schools that are not serving student subgroups well (groups that would have been rated an “F” for two consecutive years if they were their own school) will not be able to receive an “A” rating on the state’s identification system, will be designated as “Urgent Intervention Required,” and, if they remain in the category for three years, will be identified for more rigorous interventions. Schools with a group of students who would have received a “D” or “F” in any single year are designated as “Urgent Intervention Needed.”

Based on preliminary data, Louisiana expects to capture a number of schools under these definitions, ranging from 7 percent of schools with low-performing economically disadvantaged students to 43 percent of schools with low-performing groups of students with disabilities (table on page 61). Louisiana deserves credit for capturing so many schools, and for running the data to estimate the potential effects of its plan, but it may want to consider the implications for identifying so many schools with low-performing groups of students with disabilities, and how it plans to respond to this challenge.

Louisiana is proposing to include students who are former English-language learners and former students with disabilities in their respective groups. 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. And, although Louisiana may have only small populations of Asian-American and Native American students, it should make sure to include them as subgroups worthy of attention.

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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Louisiana’s A–F school-rating system provides stakeholders with a single, clear, summative rating to understand school performance. The letter grade rating provides simplicity in school identification, with those schools with a D or F for three years in a row or an adjusted cohort graduation rate less than 67 percent identified for comprehensive support on an annual basis. It estimates that approximately 17 percent of schools would fall into this category based on current data, which goes well beyond the minimal federal requirement of 5 percent, and the state expects to increase its school-grading criteria over time, ensuring that schools will continue to push for achievement and growth.

The state also deserves recognition for identifying schools with excessive out-of-school discipline for targeted support, and comprehensive intervention if they do not improve.

Although Louisiana will prevent schools with low-performing subgroups improvement from receiving an “A” in the school-rating system, this may be insufficient to ensure that overall school ratings reflect the performance of disaggregated subgroups. Some peers felt that Louisiana should consider including a specific weight for each disaggregated group of students to strengthen its A-F letter grades.

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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Louisiana has shifted from a cyclical approach to monitoring to one based on performance results. The state identifies potential risks and then sorts districts into quartiles based on their ranking on those risk factors. Louisiana provides a sample “monitoring report card,” which is a transparent, performance-based system that is more tailored to the actual needs of districts, rather than a formulaic, time-based approach. The state will also support identified schools by assigning them a Regional Turnaround Support Manager, which will oversee their improvement. This model allows a strong connection between the school and a state-level leader who can connect them with support and resources. It is an interesting idea to remove the district from this process, and one that deserves to be observed for success.

Louisiana will award a “significant” portion of its 7 percent set-aside for school improvement through a competitive grant process. The state does not define “significant,” but it does specify that it will prioritize those applications that propose to utilize high-quality external support providers.

The plan does not, however, describe the expectations or specific supports or strategies available for schools with low-performing subgroups, or for schools with high levels of out-of-school suspensions. Louisiana should include more detailed information about what types of planned interventions will be available to directly support the achievement of English-language learners and students with disabilities, particularly given the state’s plan to identify a significant number of targeted support schools based on the results of their students with disabilities. The state should align its work here with its IDEA State Systemic Improvement Plan, which focuses on literacy and includes several good interventions.

Louisiana requires that any F-rated school offer its students the option to transfer to another school within the district, and it will be taking advantage of a 3 percent set-aside to provide direct student services to students in low-performing schools. Those funds will support enrollment and participation in courses not available at the student’s home school, credit recovery or other acceleration courses, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses, or transportation to a higher-performing school.

In addition, any Louisiana school that is F-rated for four consecutive years is eligible for placement in the state’s Recovery School District (RSD), which gives the state the authority to invoke a variety of more dramatic school-improvement options. Although it does not specify exactly what determines whether schools will or will not be placed in the RSD, the state does cite evidence that schools in the RSD have shown dramatic improvements over time.

While not specifically part of its interventions for comprehensive and targeted support schools, Louisiana discusses a robust system of teacher professional development that also deserves recognition.

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?



Louisiana will exit comprehensive support schools after they achieve a C-rating for two consecutive years. This provides schools a target that will require them to show real, sustained improvement before they are eligible to exit comprehensive support status.

Louisiana proposes to exit targeted support schools if their subgroups exceed the “F” category for two consecutive years. Schools must also have an out-of-school suspension rate below a certain threshold for two years. While these provide specific targets, they imply that Louisiana accepts “D” ratings for individual subgroups, which is not very ambitious or aligned with its exit criteria for comprehensive support schools.

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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Louisiana embeds continuous improvement throughout this plan, and it is in the process of implementing a new monitoring system that will allow the state to go through a detailed analysis of risk factors that will determine the level of monitoring and interventions required for success. This type of needs assessment will be accompanied by stakeholder input and feedback and will address other factors not included in the accountability framework. This will help identify high- and low-risk school districts and allow for differentiation in the intensity of state monitoring.

Louisiana has also articulated a process for incorporating a new indicator of “interests and opportunities” by the 2019–2020 school year, including data collection, stakeholder feedback, and pilot testing the measure with no stakes.

Going forward, Louisiana should consult with disability groups to ensure the state sets ambitious standards and goals for students with disabilities, including students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Louisiana should also include strategies to ensure that parents of historically marginalized students, such as low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and English-language learners, are consulted every step of the way.