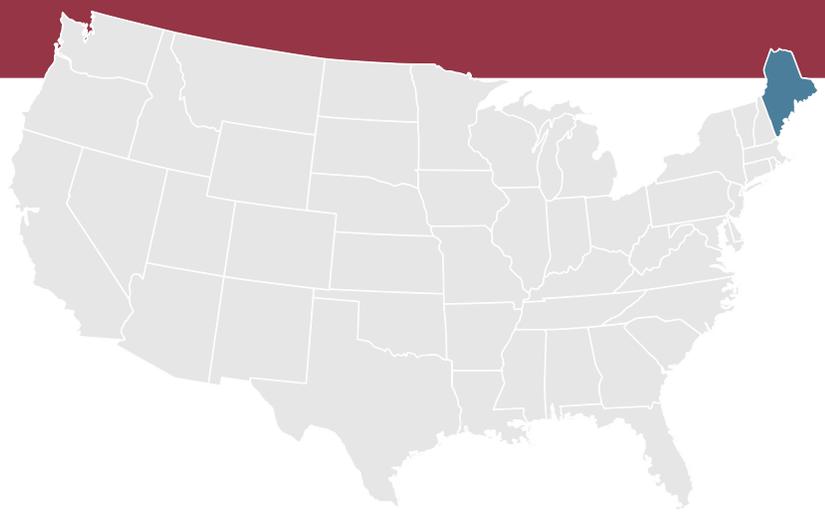


An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



Maine

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?

Maine has an innovative vision of a proficiency-based, student-centered system that supports personalized learning and empowered students who take charge of their own learning. And the state’s charge is clear: By 2030, 90 percent of Maine’s students will graduate college- and career-ready.

In addition, Maine’s requirement for all schools to develop a school-improvement plan and link it to key principles of school success is a strong approach to needs assessment and planning at the school level. The integration of a multitiered system of support approach, differentiated student interventions, and monitoring by schools has real promise.

Furthermore, Maine plans to identify for targeted support schools that fall in the bottom 5 percent of each subgroup (e.g., the 5 percent of schools with the lowest-performing subgroup of black students, the 5 percent of schools with the lowest-performing subgroup of students with disabilities). Although the state has not yet provided data on the implications of this proposal, it seems like a reasonable approach to targeting resources for low-performing subgroups.

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

Much of Maine’s plan is still incomplete, including final accountability indicators and weighting and more complete description of its school identification plan. Moreover, although Maine’s long-term priorities appear strong, it missed opportunities to embed those throughout its ESSA plan. For example, the school-improvement system and planning process for schools in need of supports doesn’t align with the state’s expressed priorities, such as learner-centered instruction, comprehensive community/school supports, equitable funding, and new technologies.

It is also unclear how Maine’s vision of a proficiency-based assessment system will be implemented statewide and how that will factor into school accountability. Similarly, if the state intends for 90 percent of students to be college- and career-ready, it would make sense for Maine to include an indicator of college and career readiness in its accountability system. Overall, each section of the plan reads as discrete and not aligned to the state’s articulated priorities in a meaningful, integrated way.

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?



Maine’s vision is clear: By 2030, 90 percent of Maine’s students will graduate college- and career-ready. The state aims to develop a proficiency-based system where students demonstrate their readiness for college and careers to graduate from high school. While this vision will be implemented through locally determined requirements, the state goal is to move to a student-centered, personalized learning approach to education that empowers student ownership of learning by design. A number of the state’s districts have established proficiency-based graduation requirements that reflect college and career readiness and have developed multiple pathways for students to meet those requirements.

However, while Maine does include long-term academic goals and measures of interim progress for English-language arts, mathematics, and English language proficiency, the first two conflict with its long-term vision. Although its long-term vision aims for 90 percent of its students graduating college- and career-ready by 2030, its interim targets in English and math stop short of that. For example, by 2030 it expects only 76 percent of its white students to be proficient in English by then, and less than 60 percent of its students with disabilities and English learners. Maine’s plan states that it is planning to update its achievement targets once it has new data at the end of June 2017, but it should also reconcile its long-term vision with its interim performance targets.

For graduation rates, the state has included a goal of 90 percent by 2030 for both the four-year and the extended-year cohort rates. Neither of these goals appears very ambitious. Since the current four- and six-year rates are 87 and 89 percent, respectively, Maine is shooting for only 1-3 percentage point gains over the next 13 years. Additionally, it’s not clear why Maine set the same goal for both the four-year and the six-year graduation rates, since more students could be expected to graduate with the additional time.

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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Maine is implementing the Common Core State Standards, which are aligned to college- and career-readiness expectations. However, Maine has implemented three different assessments in the past three years, which does not suggest strong implementation of the standards or indicate overall alignment of the state’s system. In particular, it is unclear how well the state’s English-language arts and math assessments are aligned to state standards.

The state does describe its new proficiency-based high school diploma, which will be phased in beginning with the class of 2021. The proficiency-based diploma is intended to ensure all students graduate high school having demonstrated mastery of the state’s academic content standards so that they may succeed in postsecondary education or work. However, there are multiple pathways for demonstrating proficiency/ mastery, and it is unclear how there will be consistent standards across all of them. In addition, Maine has not aligned the ways it will measure proficiency for diploma purposes and the way it does so for accountability purposes.

At the high school level, Maine has used the SAT as its accountability assessment for a number of years. 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, while offering the SAT as the state’s official test offers many benefits, some of those key benefits may not extend fully to all students who require accommodations and may not receive college-reportable scores.

As mentioned in the state’s plan, while a science assessment is not included in the accountability system, the state may consider including it in the future. Adding science achievement to the accountability system would be a way for the state to help counteract curriculum narrowing. Lastly, Maine should strengthen its plan by ensuring that it has a process in place to meet the 1 percent cap on alternate assessments 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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Maine proposes to use a simple list of indicators: academic achievement, progress, graduation rate, English proficiency, and “consistent attendance,” but the plan lacks detail on why these measures were chosen and how they will be implemented. For example, Maine does not define “consistent attendance.”

Maine indicates that one of its long-term goals is for 90 percent of students to be college- and career-ready by 2030, yet the state includes no indicators of college and career readiness in its accountability system and does not make a clear case for why the indicators it has selected are related to college and career readiness. Instead, the state is still exploring other college- and career-ready measures and the necessary data sources and definitions needed to measure them in a valid, reliable way. Additionally, Maine indicates that one high priority for the state is moving toward a proficiency-based diploma by 2021—yet nothing in the accountability system is directly related to this priority yet.

The plan states that Maine will consider adding indicators to the system in the near future. Since Maine already administers and reports results from a science assessment, the state might want to consider adding science achievement to the accountability system. Moreover, it would be helpful if the state outlined a detailed process by which it would review data, consult with stakeholders, and begin to pilot new indicators for its accountability system.

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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Maine is proposing to create a weighting scheme that provides a different balance of proficiency and growth depending on the school’s prior achievement. Although the exact weights are still in development, schools with higher achievement would have a stronger emphasis on proficiency, while those with lower achievement would have a stronger weighting on growth. While this approach may have some positive benefits, it would implicitly set up different expectations for different types of schools, and it could be a challenge to communicate clearly to educators, parents, and other stakeholders.

Moreover, this scaled approach appears to conflict with another place in the state’s plan, where Maine proposes to base 42 percent an elementary school’s grade on achievement and 38 percent on growth. Maine deserves credit for pairing a clear, transparent measure of student achievement with a relatively simple, easy-to-understand growth model that measures where students advance performance levels over time, but there are too many uncertainties to understand what Maine intends to do.

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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While it does not appear that Maine will be incorporating subgroup scores directly into its school-rating system, it does plan to identify 5 percent of each subgroup (e.g., the 5 percent of schools with the lowest-performing subgroup of black students, the 5 percent of schools with the lowest-performing subgroup of students with disabilities, etc.) as schools in need of targeted support. The state has not yet provided data behind this approach, but it seems like a reasonable method to target resources to each low-performing subgroups of students.

Maine is a largely rural state with small schools and little racial and ethnic diversity and low numbers of English learners. To include the performance of subgroups for as many schools as possible, the state has established a minimum subgroup threshold size of 10 students. To strengthen its plan, Maine might consider using multiple years of data in the accountability system to capture more subgroups and lessen the volatility with small sample sizes.

The plan indicates that schools that are identified for targeted support because of low-performing subgroups will receive a lower summative rating than they would have received if they did not have consistently underperforming subgroups of students. While this will certainly bring attention to underperforming subgroups in those schools, it is important that there be some mechanism for ensuring that underperforming subgroups are not masked in high-performing schools.

Finally, the state proposes to include former English-language learners and students with disabilities as part of those subgroups and will track their performance for two years after they exit. 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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With only a skeletal conceptual framework that does not include final definitions, methodologies, or business rules, let alone actual results, it’s hard to evaluate Maine’s school plan. Once it settles on a final weighting, the state will place schools into one of four categories (Exceeds state expectations, Meets state expectations, Below state expectations, Requires review for supports), but Maine does not specify how those categories will overlay with the methodologies for identifying schools for improvement. Maine also does not describe how it will identify schools with low graduation rates for comprehensive support status.

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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Maine has a relatively clear school-improvement planning process that may help schools with developing needs assessments and strategies, and the Transformational Leaders Network, while not described in detail, could be promising.

However, Maine has a very minimal description of interventions and supports, and does not differentiate for comprehensive support schools vs. targeted support schools. Despite referring to Tier III and Tier II supports separately, the actual supports appear to be very similar and refer only to general supports and mentors and coaches. It is not clear whether these supports will be sufficient to meet the challenges faced by those schools.

Maine provides very little information about how the state will ensure evidence-based interventions, how it would support districts in choosing appropriate interventions, and whether the state has the capacity to evaluate intervention choices, beyond a requirement that districts describe these interventions.

Even in cases where the state can direct school improvement activities (for comprehensive support and improvement schools that must implement “state-determined, more rigorous” interventions after not improving over time), the interventions outlined in the plan are far from rigorous; these schools will receive “increased face-to-face school improvement coaching support, increased district support in relation to targeted professional development, and increased financial resources”—interventions that are neither particularly rigorous nor sufficient to turn around the most challenged schools.

Maine also appears to intend to provide less than the minimum award of \$50,000 in school-improvement funds to each school, which is an extremely small amount of funding that is unlikely to make an impact on student achievement. Maine should consider funding comprehensive support schools at a higher level consistent with their needs. Without aggressive action for schools that continue to struggle, it is very unlikely the proposed supports would be sufficient to dramatically change the school's trajectory.

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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Maine has sketched out the outlines of exit criteria, but it has not provided much detail. For both comprehensive and targeted support schools to exit status, they must "maintain performance goals" above the identification criteria for two consecutive years, but the state's plan does not specify what this would mean, nor has it demonstrated whether these criteria would be sufficient to show sustained improvements.

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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Maine outlines a process for the state to monitor the implementation and progress of school and district improvement efforts, but it does not specify how it will incorporate monitoring the impact of the accountability system itself into an ongoing process of continuous improvement. While Maine describes that it will continue to convene its 22-member Advisory Workgroup and its sub-workgroups quarterly to ensure continuous improvement and feedback, the state does not mention any other continued consultation or engagement of stakeholders following the development of the plan.

To improve this area, the state could articulate a plan to engage a broader group of stakeholders at key points in time, particularly as it develops its accountability system, as well as articulate a plan to evaluate how the state will determine if its plan is successful. This could include key data or metrics that will be tracked over time, or a plan to administer surveys, desk monitoring, or other protocols to collect data on implementation from districts, schools, and other stakeholders.