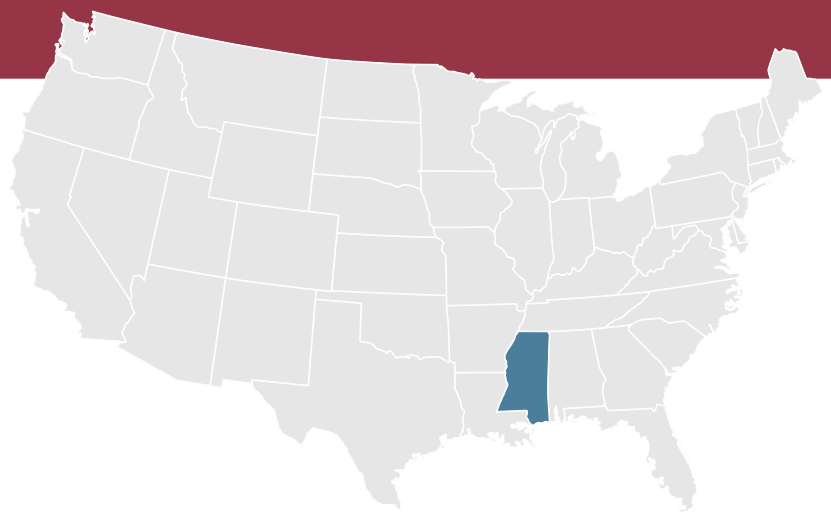


An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



Mississippi

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?

Mississippi’s plan begins with an executive summary, which provides a comprehensive overview of current facts, figures, and performance across multiple educational components. It clearly ties the ESSA plan to the state’s greater strategic plan and provides a foundational understanding for the ESSA plan, which increases accessibility for all audiences.

The state includes a strong focus on raising student achievement and accelerating college and career readiness. The state has set ambitious goals and should be commended for setting a high target for proficiency for all students and all subgroups of students. The plan’s particular focus on academic growth and accelerated coursework is an area of real strength.

Mississippi also has a clearly defined A-F school and district grading system that ensures stakeholders, schools, and students know how schools are serving their students. The policy on the cut scores for the A-F system is commendable, as its ESSA plan calls for a reassessment of these thresholds in the future to ensure the rigor of the school grades. The state’s inclusion of science and social studies assessments is another strong element of its plan, which supports a more well-rounded education approach.

The state’s plan to place low-performing schools and districts in the state’s Achievement School District is a rigorous intervention and a strength of the plan. This will enable the lowest-performing schools to receive the attention and support needed to improve. The graphic developed to communicate the continuum of school improvement categories is a comprehensive and easily understandable method of outlining a complex process.

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

Mississippi’s plan does not directly include subgroup performance in its A-F school grades. While it does include an indicator capturing the growth of the lowest-performing quartile of students, it is unclear if schools could receive high grades overall even if individual subgroups perform poorly. The plan might also have benefited from the inclusion of a non-test-based indicator for elementary/middle schools, such as chronic absenteeism.

Mississippi has not incorporated an indicator of progress toward English language proficiency in its A-F grades, which is at odds both with ESSA's requirements and the needs of the state's population of English learners, who are generally lower-performing than their English-speaking peers.

Mississippi's intervention plans for low-performing schools primarily consist of coaching and technical assistance, which lack evidence that these steps will lead to turning around low-performing schools. Additionally, Mississippi has weak requirements for exiting improvement status, which could result in exiting schools from additional supports without their showing actual improvement in student performance.

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?



Mississippi has aligned its long-term goals with those established by the Mississippi State Board of Education's Strategic Plan from 2015. The state has a strong student-focused vision of college and career readiness; however, it recognizes that it has a long way to go given very low student achievement. Mississippi sets a 10-year timeline for long-term goals with the rationale that today's 3rd graders—the first grade on which the state collects data—will be 12th graders in 10 years when college- and career-readiness data are available.

In that 10-year timeline, Mississippi has the goal of 70 percent of all student subgroups achieving proficiency in reading/language arts and mathematics. By setting a consistent goal across all subgroups, the state's "ESSA Advisory Committee" is attempting to close gaps in performance between subgroups. The baseline scores for ELA and math for the all-students group is 33 percent and 31 percent, respectively, and for black students, 19 percent and 17 percent. Therefore, a 70 percent goal seems ambitious for all students and subgroups of students as it more than doubles proficiency rates for most groups and will eliminate achievement gaps should Mississippi achieve these goals. However, the state does not provide data to suggest why it chose 70 percent versus any other goal number, and, given historical trends, these goals are likely not achievable.

As a long-term goal, Mississippi aims to close the graduation rate gap between special education students and all students from 47 percent to 20 percent, as the all-students graduation rate increases to 90 percent and the special education students subgroup increases to 70 percent by 2025. This goal would more than double the current graduation rate for special education students (from 34.7 percent to 70 percent). Mississippi will now include in the graduation rate those severely cognitively disabled students earning an alternate diploma; however, it does not indicate the impact this will have on the current rate, nor does it denote that the 2015-16 baseline data is based on a different calculation methodology. Again, the state does not provide a rationale to suggest why it chose these particular goal targets. In addition, the graduation rate goals for all other subgroups are different, unlike the prior long-term goals which were all set at the same target, and there doesn't appear to be one consistent method for calculating the separate goals.

Mississippi has also set long-term goals for English learners making progress toward English language proficiency by 2025. With 48 percent of English learners currently making sufficient progress, Mississippi aims to increase this percentage by roughly two percentage points each year, to 70 percent. To determine whether English learners are making gains, Mississippi will count the number of English learners increasing their composite proficiency level, to the next highest level on its LAS Links assessment. Mississippi could strengthen its plan by adding further information regarding how these goals are aligned with the state's overall expectation for students to exit English learner services within no more than five 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?



Mississippi uses the “Mississippi College- and Career-Readiness Standards,” a variation of the Common Core, which are more rigorous than their previous standards and aligned to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). However, while its standards have remained relatively consistent, Mississippi has used three different assessments since 2013-14, making it difficult to compare trends in performance. The current assessment, the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP), was first implemented in the 2015-16 school year, after one year of using the PARCC assessments.

At the high school level, Mississippi is using end-of-course assessments in English II and Algebra I, with an indication that it will soon begin using Algebra II end-of-course for those students who take the end-of-course Algebra I exam in 8th grade. It is unclear whether some students will be taking different high school assessments in mathematics within the accountability system as a result. If the Algebra II end-of-course exam is intended to become the high school state assessment for all students, this would impact the long-term goals and baseline information for this area as well.

The state does not offer assessments in languages other than English, noting that it is an “English only” state. It also does not identify any languages that are present to a significant extent among its English learner population. Mississippi will assess students with the most significant cognitive disabilities through an alternate assessment aligned to alternate academic achievement standards, and resulting in a state-defined alternate diploma. The state 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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Mississippi’s plan provides a simple, high-quality list of indicators of student success that will be used in an A-F school and district grading system. However, the state does not comply with ESSA’s requirement that English language proficiency be given “significant” weight in school ratings.

Besides student achievement in reading and math and on-time graduation rates, the state’s school and district grades are based on achievement in science for all grade spans and social studies in high school, learning gains for all students and the lowest-performing students in all grade spans, and measures of college and career readiness and “acceleration” in high schools. By including science and social studies in its school grades, Mississippi is signaling the critical importance of a well-rounded education for all students.

Mississippi also deserves recognition for using innovative academic measures. Its high school acceleration metric promotes preparedness for higher education and the workforce by measuring the percentage of graduates who are eligible for college credit on AP, IB, Advanced International Certification of Education (AICE) exams, or state-approved industry certification courses; who earned college credits via dual enrollment; or who earned nationally recognized industry certifications. However, the acceleration measure could be strengthened by including all students in the school, not only those who are “eligible” by virtue of being assigned to higher-level middle school courses or because they graduated high school. For example, excluding dropouts from the high school acceleration calculation likely inflates the ratings. Moreover, Mississippi should monitor its data to ensure whether all of its options are comparable, or whether certain types of students are disproportionately likely to pursue certain pathways.

Additionally, Mississippi will track if schools meet the state’s English learner language acquisition target with a (+) or (-) on the school’s overall grade. This does not appear to meet ESSA’s requirement to give English language proficiency “substantial” weight in school ratings. The state says inclusion of English language proficiency as a separately weighted indicator in the state’s accountability model “could later be implemented once valid and reliable measures of English proficiency and growth are established, and as the English learner population is more evenly distributed.” The state also does not identify for what time period it will include former English learners in its subgroup for accountability purposes.

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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Mississippi deserves credit for pairing a clear, transparent measure of student achievement against grade-level expectations (percent proficient) with a relatively simple, easy-to-understand growth model that measures whether non-proficient students advance performance levels (in whole or in part) on state tests over time, and whether proficient students maintain their performance at the proficient level. Mississippi’s accountability system also places a significant weight on measuring these learning gains—receiving twice as much weight in the school grades calculation relative to proficiency in English language arts and math—and is unique in that it includes measures of growth in high schools.

One reason growth receives such significant emphasis in Mississippi school grades is that it is the only measure in the system that includes the lowest-performing quartile of students at the school level. Half of the learning gains measure for each school examines whether its lowest-performing students are making progress from the previous year, creating strong incentives for educators and school leaders to focus on moving these students toward meeting grade-level expectations. Mississippi’s growth model primarily awards schools credit for students reaching or maintaining certain performance levels on state tests. Still, the state could do more to ensure it has sufficient incentives for students of all levels to make annual progress by ensuring that it values growth for all students, not just low-achieving students.

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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Mississippi has a few protections in place to identify student subgroups in need of support, but it also has a few glaring weaknesses. The state’s inclusion of growth for the bottom quartile of students in each school may help capture these students, as subgroups that are historically underperforming are overrepresented in the bottom quartile. However, it’s possible that a school could have a low-performing subgroup and still receive a high letter grade without ever identifying the subgroup’s low performance.

Targeted support schools are identified based on subgroup proficiency, but only as compared to the expected statewide performance of the same subgroup, not in comparison to state performance as a whole. Absent additional data about how this rule might be implemented, this raises concerns that some subgroups may be poorly served without a more rigorous bar for intervention.

Mississippi does deserve credit, however, for setting a low threshold to include subgroups of students into its accountability system (an n-size of 10 students). However, Mississippi could use its lowest-performing quartile subgroup in addition to individual subgroup performance, which would increase subgroup accountability without eliminating the combined subgroup that enables small schools to use some disaggregated data.

In addition, and as mentioned above, the lack of inclusion of the English language proficiency measure in the overall rating is a weakness, and the +/- designation for that indicator may not be sufficient to drive behavior.

Finally, Mississippi's policy for holding schools accountable if they do not meet a 95 percent participation rate in annual testing does not include subgroup protections. If a school/district does not meet the 95 percent minimum participation rate, the school/district will automatically be dropped a letter grade on the accountability system. Although this is a strong rule, it only applies to the overall average. The state would have a much stronger plan if it applied the same penalty if any individual subgroup dropped below the 95 percent threshold.

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?



Mississippi's A-F accountability system provides an overall rating for each school. While the letter grades are not incorporated into the state's identification of schools for comprehensive and targeted support, the total summative score is utilized in the identification of comprehensive support and improvement schools. For comprehensive support, schools will be identified if they are in the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools, have a graduation rate of less than or equal to 67 percent, or were a previously identified targeted support and improvement school with three consecutive years of subgroup proficiency performance at or below that of all students in the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools.

Schools will be identified for targeted support and improvement if they are in the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools not identified for comprehensive support, in which three-year average growth in school subgroup proficiency is less than the target proficiency growth rate for the same statewide subgroup and the school's subgroup proficiency rate is less than the statewide subgroup in any of the three years being calculated. The state would have a stronger plan if it linked the plan to its other metrics within the accountability system beyond just proficiency and created accountability scores per subgroup for each accountability measure.

School grades do, however, directly impact schools and districts designated for the state's Achievement School District (ASD). If a school or district receives an "F" designation for two consecutive years or for two out of three consecutive years, it may be absorbed into and become part of the ASD.

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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Mississippi’s most rigorous intervention is placing schools in the state’s Achievement School District (ASD). Schools in the ASD receive all of the interventions and supports provided to comprehensive and targeted support schools. In addition, as is the definition of the ASD, the State Department of Education takes over the governance of the school. Mississippi could have provided additional detail on the ASD approach and its capacity to manage multiple schools in such a district.

For comprehensive support schools, Mississippi has two “levels” of support. Support “Level 1” is for the bottom 30 percent of the schools identified for comprehensive support. These schools will receive face-to-face embedded coaching support, access to formula grants, priority access to professional development, and quarterly regional leadership team meetings and webinars. Support for “Level 2” comprehensive support schools (the other 70 percent) includes much of the same types of supports, but less face-to-face coaching and fewer meetings. While there may be a case for separating schools in comprehensive support for different levels of intervention, Mississippi doesn’t explain why it does so. All “F” schools, regardless of identification for comprehensive support, will have priority access to supports. The state’s ESSA plan has a clear graphic that articulates to readers the various supports and resources that comprehensive schools can access.

For targeted support schools, Mississippi is much less detailed. The state will only require that the local school board choose evidence-based interventions. The state explains that if funding is available once comprehensive schools are served, targeted support schools will also have access to formula or competitive grants. Mississippi does not intent to provide direct student services using the optional 3 percent set-aside, which would have provided the state an additional opportunity for it to align its 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?

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Mississippi’s criteria for schools to exit comprehensive and targeted support appear weak. To exit comprehensive support, schools must be above the bottom 5 percent of all Title I schools after three years, have a graduation rate over 67 percent after three years, or have subgroup performance above that of all students in the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools for three consecutive years. This system allows three separate ways of exiting support status, some of which have little to do with the school’s own improvement and more to do with slightly higher-performing schools declining in performance.

To exit targeted status, the school’s subgroup has to have a three-year average growth in proficiency above the statewide target proficiency growth for that particular subgroup. To be exited from the ASD, schools and districts must maintain an accountability rating of “C” or higher for five consecutive years.

Overall, Mississippi exit criteria seem to be relatively clear, though not necessarily linked to meaningful improvement.

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?



It is clear that Mississippi worked with state and local stakeholders to align the goals of its accountability plan with the state’s recently drafted Strategic Plan 2016-2020. The state’s ESSA plan, which is referred to as “Mississippi Succeeds,” builds upon the state plan in a coherent fashion. Throughout its ESSA plan, the state makes note of which Strategic Plan goals the sections of ESSA address. While the A-F rating scale is clear for each school, there is not a clear understanding that the state is supporting all schools to continuously improve other than those identified for additional supports.

In addition, Mississippi notes continuous improvement at various points throughout the plan, and in particular notes a plan to raise the A-F scale once more than 65 percent of schools are at a grade of “B” or higher. The plan also discusses the need to incorporate the English language proficiency indicator into the overall grade at some point in the future. It is evident from the discussion that stakeholder engagement was a critical component of creating the plan; however, explicit ways to continue engaging with stakeholders moving forward were not delineated.