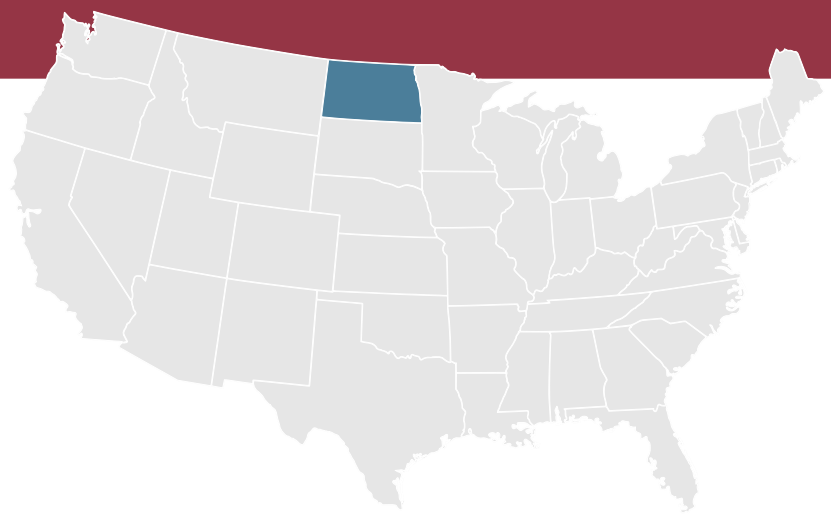


# An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



## North Dakota

### *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?

North Dakota’s plan puts forth a clear vision. The state has outlined a simple, clear list of accountability indicators, and its plan places a strong weight on student achievement and growth. It proposes to include a simple measure of student achievement (percent proficient) and a growth model that expects greater progress from lower-performing students. In addition, North Dakota has built in a promising high school indicator that is a potential model for other states as it combines important measures of a student’s readiness for college, career, and the military. Also, the state’s comprehensive approach to stakeholder engagement is noteworthy and offers guidance to states submitting plans in the next round.

North Dakota is working with an external partner, AdvancED, to develop the state’s Student Learning Index, which is an innovative model that measures academic proficiency and progress. The state will also partner with AdvancED to support its student-engagement surveys included in the school-quality indicator, the needs assessment of low-performing schools, and in the continuous-improvement framework for all schools. The development of these approaches could prove to be models for other states to review if successfully implemented with validity and reliability.

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

North Dakota’s plan appears to include a few ideas that are inconsistent with ESSA’s requirements. For example, it proposes to include former students with disabilities in its students-with-disabilities subgroup, and its timeline to identify schools with low-performing subgroups appears to be a year too slow. Moreover, North Dakota does not weight subgroup performance in its accountability system, and it proposes to cap the number of schools identified for targeted support at 10 percent of schools. Many of the state’s planned interventions in low-performing schools lack specificity, and the state plans to distribute all of its funds intended for school-improvement efforts via formula.

On a smaller scale, North Dakota should clarify how it plans to measure student growth in high school, particularly given that the state plans to allow districts assessment flexibility in high school. Also, there is concern that North Dakota’s proposal to include GEDs in its calculation of graduation rates will not meet the federal definition—and more important, that the GED does not fully align with the state’s goals for all students.

# 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?



North Dakota has articulated a vision that “All students will graduate choice ready with the knowledge, skills, and disposition to be successful in whatever they choose to do, whether they pursue a post-secondary degree, enroll in a technical college, enter the workforce, or join the military.” This “Choice Ready” goal is embedded throughout the state’s plan.

North Dakota also set a goal of reducing the number of nonproficient students by 33 percent in six years. These targets are individualized for every school and subgroup, making them consistent with the “continuous improvement” framework. It is not clear if North Dakota has analyzed historical data to set this goal. Without this data, it is difficult to determine whether the goals are ambitious and attainable. For example, meeting this goal would still result in a statewide reading proficiency rate of 68 percent, but less than 40 percent among English-language learners.

North Dakota’s four-year graduation rate goal is 90 percent for all students and each student group. However, the state also set its graduation goals without any analysis of historical data or state trends, so it is difficult to determine whether this goal is ambitious or attainable. Further, North Dakota includes GED students in its graduation rate calculation. Including GEDs would put North Dakota out of alignment with other states, not to mention out of compliance with federal requirements. Furthermore, including the GED may not fully align with North Dakota’s goal of ensuring that all students graduate “Choice Ready.”

**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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North Dakota has been using Smarter Balanced, which was aligned to the state’s standards. It is currently in the process of revising its state standards and replacing its assessments. Given the challenges that such transitions present for students and schools, North Dakota should provide additional details about the state’s process for developing and approving new standards and assessments. The plan does not include sufficient details about the state’s process to assess the rigor and quality of the replacement standards. It is unclear what validation process the state will undertake to ensure that the standards are aligned with entry into college without the need for remediation.

Similarly, it is unclear how the state will validate that its new assessments are aligned with these new standards. North Dakota should make clear how it will engage stakeholders in this process. The state could 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.

The state intends to use the flexibility provided within ESSA to allow local districts to administer a nationally recognized high school assessment. It is not clear what process the state will use to approve assessments proposed by local districts and to ensure districts provide reasonable accommodations to English learners and students with 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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In addition to achievement, growth, and English-language proficiency, North Dakota has included two indicators in its accountability system that are worthy of highlighting: student engagement and a “Choice Ready” measure.

North Dakota proposes to use a survey of student engagement as its measure of school quality. This has the potential to capture student perceptions of their school environment, but North Dakota should proceed thoughtfully to ensure the validity and reliability of such an instrument, and ensure that its use and weighting are supported. The state may also want to consider how it will respond and support schools based on what the survey reveals.

As articulated above, North Dakota aims for every student to graduate ready for college, career, or the military. To embed this goal in its accountability system, North Dakota is pursuing a “Choice Ready” indicator that sets forth a common set of expectations for all students, as well as additional requirements specific to each pathway. Nonetheless, the state should monitor implementation and ensure that this measure does not lower teacher expectations for certain groups of students, or lower those same students’ expectations of themselves.

The state’s graduation rate indicators have strengths and weaknesses. On the positive side, North Dakota’s decision to include five- and six-year graduation rates will encourage schools to prioritize students who may need additional time in high school. However, it is unclear how the 13 percent weight assigned to graduation rates is distributed across the state’s three proposed measures. North Dakota could further strengthen its plan by weighting the four-year graduation rate more heavily.

**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?



North Dakota’s plan places a strong weight on student achievement and growth. It proposes to include a simple measure of student achievement (percent proficient), and a growth model that expects greater progress from lower-performing students. For elementary and middle schools, the state plans to give the same weight to achievement and growth (each are given 30 percent of a school’s rating).

North Dakota’s growth model, the Student Learning Index, incentivizes both academic growth and academic proficiency. It’s a sophisticated model, and it could prove to be an innovative and useful tool. However, the state should consider carefully how it communicates the results to parents to ensure they have the information they need to understand how their child’s school is performing, and how that performance compares with other schools.

At the high school level, the state will weight proficiency at 25 percent, and growth and the “Choice Ready” measure will be worth 22 percent combined. It’s not clear how the 22 percent will be divided, and it’s also not clear how the state will be able to measure academic growth at the high school level if every district can select its own assessment and if the test is administered only once. Given that North Dakota intends to allow high schools to choose their own assessments, it will be critical that these assessments meet validity, reliability, and comparability requirements.

North Dakota includes growth for English-language learners as the metric for language acquisition. North Dakota has decided to use a growth-to-target model for setting interim student-level goals for English-language learners’ annual English acquisition. North Dakota might also consider factoring in the age/grade with the English-language proficiency baseline performance in determining the timeline for language acquisition.

**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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Because there are so many small and rural schools in North Dakota, the state decided to use a small n-size of 10 students. This approach was reinforced through extensive engagement with stakeholders who wanted to make sure every student counted. However, the state is planning to operationalize this with a 99 percent confidence interval, which will have the effect of diminishing the number of subgroups identified for improvement.

North Dakota does not weight subgroup performance in its accountability system, and it proposes to cap the number of schools identified for targeted support at 10 percent of schools. Additionally, North Dakota is proposing to look only at four historically under-performing groups. The state provides compelling data behind its focus on these four groups, but it appears inconsistent with the requirements of ESSA to capture *any* low-performing group.

North Dakota also proposes to include former students with disabilities in its students-with-disabilities subgroup. 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. On the positive side, the state is measuring English-language growth for *all* K-12 students, which goes beyond ESSA's requirement to track it only in grades 3-8 and once in high school.

**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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North Dakota will annually identify the lowest-performing 5 percent of Title I schools based on all of the accountability model indicators. These schools will be labeled comprehensive support schools.

North Dakota will identify an additional 10 percent of schools from across the state for targeted support and improvement. Five percent of schools with the lowest subgroup performance will be identified, as well as the 5 percent of schools with the largest gaps in student achievement. North Dakota should run simulations of the large-gaps data to ensure the state is identifying those schools with low-performing subgroups who are not making progress toward the long-term goal of reducing the percentage of nonproficient students, and to ensure that its 5 percent caps are not protecting schools with low-performing groups that would otherwise be identified. Additionally, North Dakota proposes to wait until the 2019-2020 school year to identify targeted schools, but ESSA requires the first group to be identified in 2018-19.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that North Dakota identifies only three categories of schools: general, targeted, and comprehensive. This misses the opportunity to identify, highlight, and learn from the state's highest-performing schools.

**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?



North Dakota's approach to supporting its lowest-performing schools feels less coherent than other parts of the state's plan. While school improvement funds are being made available to identified schools, the constellation of supports is not comprehensive, and many of the state's planned interventions lack specificity. For example, North Dakota is working to execute a memorandum of understanding with an as-yet unspecified external entity to provide coaching and consultation to create an improvement plan that meets undetermined state expectations. Moreover, the state does not specify any more rigorous interventions for those schools that fail to exit comprehensive support and improvement status.

North Dakota has established a multitiered system of supports for identified schools. The model includes a needs assessment, training in developing plans, professional development, data analysis support, monitoring, and access to research based strategies for student support. Unfortunately, it is not clear how these supports will be accessed or implemented.

North Dakota plans to distribute its 7 percent set-aside of funds dedicated for school-improvement strategies through a formula. Since the state has opted not to use competitive funding, it should at least consider using a rigorous process for reviewing and approving these improvement plans.

**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?



North Dakota has established rigorous criteria for exiting comprehensive support status, though the exit criteria for targeted support schools do not appear to be as strong.

Determinations of which schools are identified for comprehensive support are revisited every three years. North Dakota sets reasonable exit criteria that require schools to meet predetermined expectations that are equivalent to the entry criteria for three consecutive years.

Determinations of schools identified for targeted support are weaker. They appear to be revisited annually, raising the concern that schools could bounce in and out of status. Schools exit when they no longer meet the eligibility criteria or meet their interim goals for the identified subgroup for two consecutive years.

**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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Continuous improvement is a cornerstone of North Dakota’s vision. The state will keep its ESSA Planning Committee intact after its plan is submitted, and the committee will work with the state Department of Education to monitor progress toward statewide goals, and review and revise the state’s plan as needed.

In addition, the state—which does not itself have extensive support capacity—has turned to a statewide partner, AdvancEd, to help build district capacity and fuel improvement. Through AdvancED, schools have access to a comprehensive suite of data collection tools and diagnostic instruments that they use to develop their own improvement plans and submit them to the state. These plans are developed following a six-step, data-informed, and inquiry-based process. Schools are then supported with web tools, access to expert training and support, and periodic “inspectorate” visits. These tools should provide added value in the form of reports and insights to schools and districts on academic achievement data, growth data, and student engagement data.

The success of this partnership is yet to be determined, but it is crucial to North Dakota’s implementation of ESSA. It is an interesting model and one worth watching and learning from.