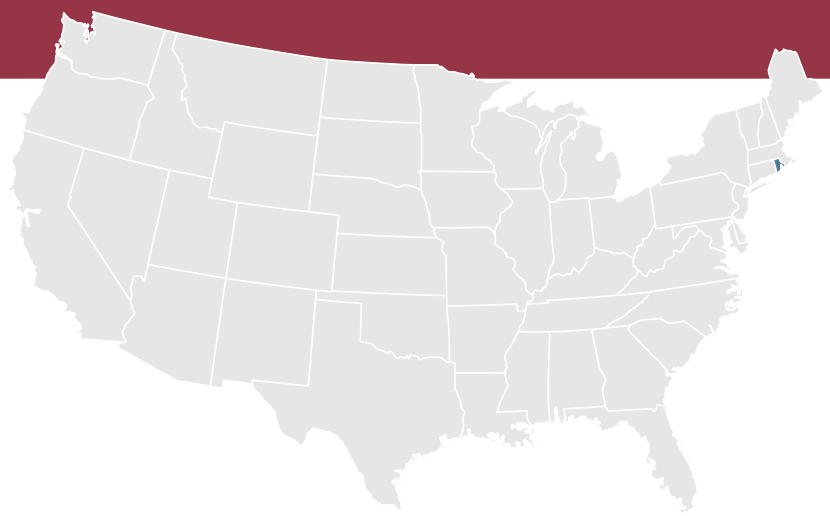


# An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



## Rhode Island

### *Project Overview*

**B**ellwether 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?

Rhode Island has a well-written, solid plan that is clear, concise, and rooted in a shared statewide vision for P-20 education, which is made explicit throughout the plan by its inclusion of pre-k and postsecondary education. The alignment of its vision with its long-term goals, summative ratings, and identification of schools needing support is strong. The state has selected robust indicators to include in a parent-friendly five-star rating system, with incentives to focus on student growth and achievement, and in subjects beyond reading and math. The state has also designed indicators to broaden the scope of its ratings, such as chronic absence of students and teachers, out-of-school suspensions, and, at the high school level, student preparedness for college and careers.

Rhode Island’s plan for supporting schools is also exemplary and offers many approaches other states could learn from. It features a state-curated hub of resources, tools, and information for all identified schools, coupled with comprehensive, robust strategies for schools facing the most significant challenges. The state’s requirements for dramatic turnaround in comprehensive support schools, including changes to school governance and design, in its School Redesign policy is another significant strength, as is its requirement for districts to establish Community Advisory Boards to formalize continuous and meaningful stakeholder engagement in the process. Rhode Island couples these strategies with an innovative approach to awarding school improvement funds, including three types of competitive grants.

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

While Rhode Island’s description of its indicators is clear, as is the number of points that must be earned on each of the indicators to receive a particular star rating, the plan omits key details that tie the state’s indicators and ratings together. The plan fails to clarify how subgroup performance is factored into its indicators and overall rating system. The system is also fairly complicated, and Rhode Island does not fully explain how performance on each indicator is linked to the number of points schools earn for that indicator. Without this information, it is difficult to determine whether Rhode Island is setting rigorous expectations that are aligned with its goals and appropriately weighting indicators most associated with student success. Given its complexity, the state will need to rely on creating a well-designed, clear report card to ensure that information is understandable and accessible.

Rhode Island’s shift to all new assessments should also be closely monitored, as it is quite possible its baseline data could change, particularly related to its long-term goals and indicators. It is also unclear whether the PSAT and SAT are well aligned to the state’s academic standards in high schools.

Finally, Rhode Island should consider setting exit criteria for schools that will require sustained improvement from students on all of the measures that triggered identification in order to ensure that schools do not constantly cycle in and out of improvement.

## 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?



Rhode Island presents a plan based on a shared vision for 70 percent of adults attaining a postsecondary degree or credential by 2025. The state does an exemplary job of aligning the governor’s education initiatives to its plan, which sets long-term goals and interim targets to double the state’s proficiency rate for the all-students group. Moreover, if achieved, the state would narrow achievement and graduation gaps by seeing greater gains for historically underperforming students. The goals appear ambitious overall; Rhode Island states that gains of this size have never been made before, especially in the timeframe set. Without additional data, though, it is unclear if the goals are attainable.

Rhode Island’s goals are straightforward: 75 percent of students will be proficient and 95 percent of students will graduate on time by 2025. The state faces two significant challenges in meeting this ambitious goal. First, each subgroup is expected to see the same rate of progress each year, based on the gap between the baseline for the all-students group and the long-term goals. However, this means groups starting further behind will not actually reach the goal by 2025. For example, the goal for students with disabilities reaches 95 percent on-time graduation in 2031. Second, the state is aiming for 95 percent of its students to graduate on time by 2025, yet its achievement goals only expect 75 percent of students to be proficient. This gap will need to narrow in order to ensure students are college- and career-ready and on a path for postsecondary success in order to align with the state’s overall goal of 70 percent postsecondary attainment.

With regard to English language proficiency (ELP), Rhode Island’s goals expect all English learners to make sufficient progress each year to attain ELP within six years, although students with higher levels of initial ELP will be expected to do so more quickly. Based on this methodology, 41 percent of English learners are meeting their annual targets currently, and Rhode Island has set a goal for this to increase to 67 percent by 2025 (a 3 percentage point increase annually). However, it is similarly unclear if these goals are attainable.

**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?



Rhode Island is implementing the Common Core State Standards, which are aligned to college- and career-ready expectations. But the state is developing and administering a new assessment in nearly every subject and grade level in the current school year. In grades 3-8, instead of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment, Rhode Island will be using the RICAS (Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System), which is derived from the Next-Generation Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)—which itself is derived, in part, from PARCC.

At the high school level, Rhode Island is transitioning to using the PSAT and SAT. While both are familiar to students and families, and recognized at colleges across the country, absent an independent review, we don’t yet know whether the PSAT and SAT are fully aligned to Rhode Island’s academic standards. It is also unclear how the state will ensure there are appropriate accommodations in place for English learners and students with disabilities. Offering the SAT as the state’s official test comes with many benefits, but some of those key benefits may not extend fully to all students requiring accommodations, who may, for example, not receive college-reportable scores.

The state should be commended for adopting a new high-quality alternate assessment aligned to alternate achievement standards for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities: Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM). However, Rhode Island could strengthen its plan by providing 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.

For English learners, Rhode Island offers the WIDA ACCESS 2.0 assessment of English language proficiency, and a Spanish translation for the math RICAS but not in English language arts. There is also an option for language translation for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities on DLM.

**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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Rhode Island proposes to use a robust set of ten indicators to classify schools, although only seven are fully ready to use: an Academic Proficiency index, a Student Growth index, Exceeds Expectations, Composite High School Graduation Rate, English Language Proficiency Progress index, Chronic Absenteeism, and Student Suspension indicators. Most of these indicators are actionable, research-based (and where there is insufficient research, the state promises to provide data demonstrating how each measure differentiates schools in the future), and based on multiple years of data if possible to increase stability.

But the number of measures Rhode Island will use may make the system as a whole too complicated, and it is unclear exactly how points are achieved on each indicator and the weighting of the indicators in the overall school rating. Further, some of the indicators include very similar measures that may not be sufficiently discrete to add extra information to the system. For example, in high schools, Rhode Island will include a Graduate Proficiency indicator and the Academic Proficiency index, both of which provide information on achievement in English language arts and math. The difference between them is the denominator, with one examining a high school’s graduating cohort and the other test takers during the previous two school years. It is also using its Proficiency index, with partial credit awarded to students not reaching the proficient level, and a separate Exceeds Expectations indicator that measures the percentage of students scoring at advanced levels. While this is a novel approach to focus attention on students at all levels of performance, it is not clear how the additional indicator aids in meaningful differentiation of schools. And as currently drafted, Rhode Island combines the four-, five-, and six-year rate, which could dilute the value of on-time completion, in conflict with the state’s goals.

Rhode Island made an effort to adopt innovative indicators and achieve a more holistic view of school quality, even though the trade-off is a high number of measures. The state is building incentives for schools to emphasize subjects beyond reading and math. For example, it will update its system in 2021 to include science proficiency. The state will also measure chronic absenteeism of both students and teachers—a noteworthy addition to the measure—and the rate of out-of-school suspensions.

For high schools, the Post-Secondary Success indicator (once implemented) is laudable as it will incentivize the completion of college- and career-ready pathways by providing points for earning an industry-approved credential, college credits through dual enrollment, or successfully completing Advanced Placement. The indicator will also be aligned with the state’s diploma options. Over time, Rhode Island plans to include the state’s Seal of Biliteracy and Career Pathway endorsement in the indicator.

**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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Rhode Island has created strong incentives for schools to prioritize proficiency and growth, and is unique in that it also measures growth in high schools. That said, some peers expressed concern regarding the validity of measuring growth between the PSAT and SAT, as these tests have not traditionally been used for this purpose.

Rhode Island’s growth model, called Student Growth Percentiles (SGP), compares the progress students make in English language arts and math against their similarly performing peers and converts the scores into percentiles. The state’s growth index then awards points based on whether students tend to demonstrate “low,” “typical,” or “high” growth based on the mean SGP of the school. While this is a relatively simple calculation, it does not measure whether students cover the content they must master to stay on track toward mastery at graduation. Rhode Island deserves credit for pairing this type of growth model with a measure of achievement in its Academic Proficiency index (which awards partial credit to students not yet proficient, and full credit to students who are proficient and advanced) and Exceeds Expectations indicators (which measures the percentage of students at advanced levels). As noted earlier, this is a somewhat complicated approach, but Rhode Island deserves credit for emphasizing achievement at all levels—including levels indicative of college and career readiness.

Given the rules Rhode Island proposes to classify schools in its five-star rating system, it is possible that a school could not be awarded a high rating unless students demonstrated strong results on the proficiency index, growth index, and Exceeds Expectations indicators. Still, Rhode Island should monitor its data moving forward to ensure any emphasis on SGP scores does not dilute the benefits of having high state standards.

**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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Although the state indicates it will report disaggregated results for schools on its indicators, subgroup performance on each indicator is not included in the rules that determine a school’s classification in Rhode Island’s one- to five-star system. That said, the state has created several special rules to ensure that overall ratings reflect the needs of very low-performing groups of students. For example, the state proposes a policy that a school may not receive a five-star rating if it has a consistently underperforming group and may not receive a four-star rating if it has two such groups. This could be considered by other states as a way of safeguarding against subgroups being hidden under averages or summative ratings.

Similarly, a school cannot receive a five-star rating if it misses the 95 percent participation requirement on state tests for its all-students group. Non-participants are also included in the denominator for calculating the Academic Proficiency index, penalizing schools if participation falls below 95 percent on that measure. This goes above the bare minimum requirements of ESSA and will help ensure all students' progress is considered.

In addition, Rhode Island will identify schools for comprehensive support on the basis of subgroup performance in multiple ways, above and beyond ESSA's requirements. Schools in additional targeted support that do not meet their exit criteria become comprehensive support schools, as well as schools that have two or more consistently underperforming subgroups, or a single subgroup (comprising more than 50 percent of the school's population) that is consistently underperforming for four years. These are noteworthy approaches that will provide more focus and supports to schools with persistent achievement gaps.

The state's minimum group size for reporting (10) and accountability (20) are appropriate for balancing the needs of privacy, transparency, and inclusion of subgroups. However, it is unclear whether schools without sufficient numbers of English learners can be awarded a four- or five-star rating, as the business rules to classify schools only account for schools where the English language proficiency indicator is "not applicable" at the two- and three-star levels. Rhode Island should clarify how its classification rules apply to schools without the subgroup.

**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?



Rhode Island's new one- to five-star rating system will provide stakeholders with a clear and transparent summative rating to understand school performance. However, the state also needs to provide more information about the business rules it is using to award star ratings in general, to ensure that there is sufficient emphasis on those measures most associated with academic success, and that there is alignment between the rating system and Rhode Island's high standards and goals.

Specifically, Rhode Island's classification rules are not compensatory; in other words, low performance on a single indicator—including a school quality indicator—determines the final rating. But it is unclear how high the bar has been set for a school to receive five stars for any given indicator, as the plan lacks detail about what distinguishes a school from earning three points (the maximum for many indicators) versus only two or one. These details should be added to the plan.

That said, the rating system is well aligned to school identification. All one-star schools are eligible for identification for comprehensive support, defined as the bottom 5 percent of schools identified in the one-star category based on achievement and growth data; Rhode Island could strengthen its plan by including data on the number of one-star schools that will not be identified through this approach and show how their performance

differs from those that are placed in comprehensive support. All high schools with four-year graduation rates below 67 percent will also be identified for comprehensive support and receive a one-star designation—a strong approach, especially since the graduation rate indicator considers extended-year rates. Schools are identified annually, which will help ensure they receive attention promptly to improve, especially if there are resources in place to support them.

Similarly, schools will be identified each year for targeted support and improvement if any subgroup, on its own, would meet the requirements to be classified as a one-star school on any indicator. Schools needing additional targeted supports will be a subset of these schools, identified using the same growth and achievement parameters (described above) that distinguish the bottom 5 percent of schools in comprehensive support. If schools receiving additional targeted supports do not improve over time, they may subsequently be identified for comprehensive support.

**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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Rhode Island describes a robust system of school improvement, particularly for schools in comprehensive support, which seeks to balance the role between the state, district, and community. Nearly every component of its plan could be a model for others—including its approach to provide information to districts and support evidence-based activities, to embed community feedback in the process (described in the Continuous Improvement section), to ensure rigorous and dramatic change in schools that fail to improve over time, and to provide resources in targeted, strategic ways to support district and school efforts.

The majority of Rhode Island’s activities will be supported through a School Improvement Resource Hub, which the state will populate with resources and tools. The Hub will include (1) information about evidence-based strategies and districts in the state that have successfully implemented them; (2) resources to support districts such as a needs assessment template, guides to develop improvement plans, rubrics to review resource allocation in schools, and tools to support data analysis to track progress against goals; and (3) information to help districts identify partners. To build the Hub, Rhode Island will be releasing a Request for Information to vet available resources from districts and third parties. The state is also developing a framework to approve all comprehensive support plans and will provide it to districts to use in their role in approving targeted support plans.

Rhode Island’s plan also introduces an innovative School Redesign policy. School Redesign plans must be approved by the Rhode Island Council for Elementary and Secondary Education, with five distinct approaches that are backed by evidence and include significant changes in the way schools are governed and managed: Empowerment; Restart; Small Schools of Choice; LEA-Proposed Redesign; and School Closure. The level of specificity and rigor of these strategies, along with the evidence Rhode Island provides to support each



approach, should be commended. While only required of schools in comprehensive support that fail to meet the exit criteria, districts may voluntarily adopt Redesign at any point—and are encouraged to do so, given additional resources (see below) made available to support these schools.

Finally, Rhode Island should be commended for its smart choices with regard to the 7 percent Title I set-aside for school improvement activities. Half of the set-aside will be distributed by formula, while the remaining half will support three competitive awards: Innovation, School Redesign, and Dissemination. Innovation grants will help support improvement aligned with state strategic priorities and may identify new evidence-based strategies to add to the Hub. School Redesign grants support either district planning or implementation of a Redesign plan. Dissemination grants pair districts with identified schools with districts that have implemented a strategy that improved student outcomes in a similar school. All three of these designs are exemplars for other states. Rhode Island also includes the criteria it will use to evaluate district applications for formula grants to ensure that districts' plans are comprehensive, include evidence-based strategies and criteria to monitor the success of the plan, and discuss how it will be sustained over time. If districts don't meet the criteria, funding will be reallocated to competitive awards. That said, the state should also indicate if and how it intends to provide direct student services using the optional 3 percent Title I set-aside, which could provide further opportunity to support its low-performing schools.

**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?



Rhode Island has established exit criteria for comprehensive support schools that permit schools to exit once they improve either their achievement or growth above the levels used to identify them for comprehensive support. This is problematic, as it means schools could exit even if they are still among the bottom 5 percent of schools in the state when both measures are examined and does not consider whether these gains have been sustained. Because Rhode Island identifies schools annually, it is also unclear whether a school could exit based on these criteria, but immediately be reidentified as it continues to be among the bottom 5 percent when both achievement and growth are considered.

The exit criteria for schools needing additional targeted support suffer from even larger flaws. To exit, Rhode Island requires schools to show that the annual change in performance of its struggling subgroup exceeds the annual change statewide for that group. This methodology does not require sustained progress for multiple years, and moreover, permits schools to exit even if the achievement or growth of the subgroup is similar to schools in the bottom 5 percent (i.e., the criteria used to identify them). Worse, if the subgroup statewide is struggling, or even declining, then a minimal amount of progress for the subgroup in the school could be enough to exit, as the criteria are relative.

Finally, Rhode Island’s plan includes a provision that permits districts with schools that are “on-track” to meet their exit criteria after a year to petition for a one-year waiver from being labeled a one-star school, even though they would remain in improvement. This practice, while trying to recognize and reward progress, could undermine transparency, particularly as these schools may still meet the classification rules that place schools in one-star status.

**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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While the state could provide additional information on how it will monitor ESSA implementation and ensure continuous improvement, it is noteworthy that Rhode Island will adjust its accountability system in 2021 to adopt several new indicators, including science proficiency, a Commissioner’s Seal indicator (to replace the High School Graduation Proficiency indicator), and additional measures of Post-Secondary Success. Further, the state will conduct randomized visits to schools receiving one- and five-star ratings as a way to calibrate and audit the rating system for consistency and accuracy—an exemplary practice other states could emulate. As new indicators are adopted, Rhode Island also commits to continue to provide evidence of how each indicator is valid, reliable, and supports meaningful differentiation.

Although the plan does not discuss how stakeholders will be part of ongoing implementation at the state level, Rhode Island has addressed stakeholder engagement in school improvement efforts locally. Any district with a school in comprehensive support must create a Community Advisory Board (CAB) to ensure a variety of partners have a role in the process. The CAB will present a report on school improvement each year to the local school board, as well as to the state agency. And districts must describe how they will build the capacity of their CAB in each school improvement plan. The CAB structure and role is a novel idea that all other states should seriously consider to formalize the role of community engagement and bring multiple voices into improvement efforts.

Finally, we encourage Rhode Island to be more explicit about how it plans on continuously reviewing these and other novel ideas in its plan so that it can discern what is working and what needs more work. Rhode Island is committing to implement many new approaches in its plan, and adding explicit timelines and processes to reflect and make mid-course corrections to help meet its ambitious goals will be critical steps toward creating a culture of continuous improvement.