

# An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans

The 2015 passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) ushered in a new era for state accountability systems. ESSA provides states an opportunity to rethink their systems for identifying which schools need to improve and in what ways. States are required to submit their plans for a federal peer review process so that the plans can be in place for the 2017–18 school year.

In order to monitor state efforts as they begin this process, and to hold all states to a common, high bar, Bellwether Education Partners, in partnership with the Collaborative for Student Success, will be convening an **objective, independent peer review process** of state accountability plans. After states submit their official plans, we will bring together a panel of experts on state and federal accountability, from a range of political viewpoints, and ask for their honest feedback.

**Project Goals:** To serve as an **independent review** apart from the federal process; capture the strengths and weaknesses of each state’s plan; and provide feedback to parents, educators, state policymakers and advocates interested in improving their community’s schools.

## How does this review differ from the federal review?

Our review is aligned to the federal peer review process, as well as tools developed by other external groups, but it differs in important ways:

1. Our review is focused on a select number of questions and will not cover everything in state plans. Our analysis is designed to give parents, educators, and policymakers perspective on the state’s plan, including areas where it stands out as an exemplar for other states, and places where it could stand to benefit from learning about best practices in other states.
2. Compliance with federal law is necessary but offers an incomplete view of state plans. Beyond mere compliance, we’ll also be asking peers to assess state plans for their likelihood of success in accomplishing the state’s vision on education.
3. The independent nature of our process will allow peers to candidly assess each state plan on the basis of their years of expertise in the field.

## What are we looking for?

**THE GOOD:** Although we're hoping to identify a range of innovative approaches, **this review is designed to favor strong state-level accountability systems** that are **rooted in college- and career-ready standards for all students**. Accountability systems can help improve short- and long-term student outcomes, but only if they contain **ambitious but achievable goals**, as well as **guardrails to help focus schools' attention on the students who need the most help**.

**THE BAD:** On the other hand, **poorly designed accountability systems can be "gamed" in unproductive ways**. Instead of focusing on higher-order skills and annual progress, some accountability systems have encouraged schools to focus on basic skills and to **push all students through to a diploma, regardless of what they learn along the way**.

We believe states should seize ESSA as an opportunity to push for the state education improvements that matter most. That call to action is important for all students, but especially for disadvantaged students, who rely on public schools the most and who have historically been under-served by them. Shortly after states submit their plans, we'll compile our expert reviews and release them to the public. The draft rubric below outlines the criteria our peers will use to monitor the state plans.

## Our Rubric for Grading ESSA State Plans

### Overall Strengths and Weaknesses

**Strengths:** What are the most promising aspects of the state's plan? What parts are worth emulating by other states?

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

## Plan Components

For each of the following components, please rate the state’s plan 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?

1       2       3       4       5

**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?

1       2       3       4       5

**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?

1       2       3       4       5

**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?

1       2       3       4       5

**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?

1       2       3       4       5

**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?

1       2       3       4       5

**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?

1       2       3       4       5

**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?

1       2       3       4       5

**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?

1       2       3       4       5