Every Student Succeeds Act Primer:
Deeper Learning
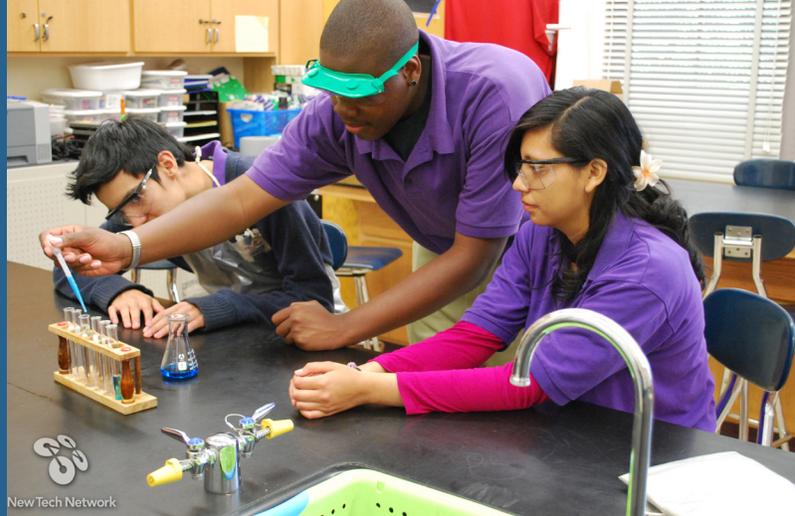
The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 offers a number of opportunities for states and districts to advance deeper learning and ensure that all students graduate from high school with the ability to think critically, solve complex problems, collaborate with peers, communicate effectively, and be self-directed. Deeper learning is the delivery of challenging academic standards to students in innovative ways that allow them to learn, and then apply what they have learned. True deeper learning is developing competencies that enable students to graduate from high school ready for college and a career and then make maximum use of their knowledge in life and work.

Standards

Under ESSA, states are required to adopt challenging academic content standards and demonstrate that those standards align with entrance requirements for credit-bearing course work in the state's public system of higher education and with relevant state career and technical education (CTE) standards. By adopting challenging academic standards that ask students to think critically and analyze complex problems, states can help develop deeper learning.

Assessments

Assessments that measure a broad range of knowledge and skills, rather than the narrow range measured by most current tests, are vital to determine whether students are attaining deeper learning competencies. ESSA includes several assessment provisions that support deeper learning:

- Assessments must include measures that assess higher-order thinking skills and understanding. States may deliver assessments, in part, in the form of portfolios, projects, or extended-performance tasks designed to encourage students to think critically and solve complex problems.

- The state may administer assessments through either a single summative assessment or multiple interim assessments provided during an academic year. Those interim assessments result in a single summative score. This is an opportunity to implement a more robust system of assessments that support deeper learning.

- A district may submit for approval from the state, permission to use a "nationally-recognized" high school academic assessment instead of the state high school assessment for accountability purposes. The nationally-recognized high school assessment must meet federal assessment requirements regarding alignment, quality, and validity and may be more rigorous in content coverage and difficulty than state-designed assessments.

- ESSA authorizes federal funding for state assessments with an emphasis on balanced assessment systems that can measure the full range of state standards and competency-based assessments that allow students to advance based on demonstrated mastery of a skill. These provisions make it easier for states to develop and implement higher-quality assessments that target higher-order thinking skills more effectively than narrow, low-quality assessments. For example, assessments may incorporate

extended-performance tasks to measure students' depth of knowledge. States also may use federal assessment funding to improve the delivery of assessments and support teachers in the development of classroom-based assessments, interpreting data from assessments, and using that information for designing instruction.

- ESSA allows up to seven states, and a consortium not to exceed four states, to implement an innovative assessment and accountability pilot, including competency- or performance-based assessments.

Direct Student Services to Support Access to Rigorous Academics

Under ESSA, a state may use up to 3 percent of its Title I funds for "direct student services" that may support the acquisition of deeper learning skills. States award grants to geographically diverse districts to use these funds. Districts may use these funds to support

- student enrollment and participation in academic courses not otherwise available at a school, including advanced course work;

- activities that assist students in completing credit-bearing postsecondary education-level instruction, such as Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, including covering fees associated with such course work; and

- components of personalized learning.

Teacher Capacity to Support Deeper Learning

States may use federal professional development funding in the following ways to help teachers develop and implement deeper learning strategies:

- build teacher capacity to use data and assessments to improve classroom practice;

- develop and implement instructional practices that support dual- or concurrent-enrollment programs and the integration of rigorous academics, CTE, and work-based learning; and

- create common planning time to allow teachers to collaborate on efforts to prepare students for postsecondary education and the workforce.

Successful Transitions

A school operating a "schoolwide program" under ESSA's Title I must describe in its "schoolwide program plan" how it will address the needs of all children in the school, particularly the needs of students at risk of not meeting the challenging state academic standards. The school may address the academic needs of these students by preparing students for and building their awareness of opportunities for postsecondary education and the workforce and broadening access to course work that enables students to earn postsecondary credit while in high school (e.g., AP, IB, dual or concurrent enrollment, or early college high schools).

For additional fact sheets and videos about ESSA, visit www.all4ed.org/essa/.

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