

# Every Student Succeeds Act Primer:

## Parent and Community Engagement



July 2016

**To strengthen the nation's education system, schools, districts, and states must actively engage parents and communities. The recently passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, which replaces the No Child Left Behind Act, includes specific requirements that parents and communities can use to make their voices heard.**

### State and District Education Plans

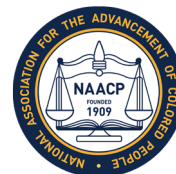
Under ESSA, states and districts that receive federal funds to support students from low-income families, known as Title I, must develop plans to strengthen the education of all students. ESSA requires states and districts to ensure that students from low-income families and students of color are not taught by inexperienced or ineffective teachers at higher rates than white and more affluent students. States and districts also must address how they will reduce the overuse of school discipline practices that remove students from the classroom and contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. ESSA requires states and districts to engage parents in the development of these plans.

As part of that development process, parents should ask their school, district, and state education leaders the following questions:

1. How and when will state and district leaders notify parents about opportunities to help develop state and district Title I plans?
2. What steps will states and districts take to identify and address resource disparities between schools that serve predominantly affluent communities and schools that serve predominantly students from low-income families and students of color?
3. What steps will states and districts take to ensure that schools that serve predominantly students from low-income families and students of color have effective teachers and principals?
4. What steps will states and districts take to improve [school climate](#)<sup>1</sup> and reduce the overuse of discipline policies, such as suspension and expulsion, that remove students from the classroom?
5. What steps will states and districts take to ensure that all students have access to the [course work and materials](#)<sup>2</sup> needed for students to graduate from high school ready for college and a career?
6. How will states and districts identify schools with large achievement gaps between students of color and other students? What support will states and districts provide to help these students excel?

### School Improvement Plans

Under ESSA, a school must develop an improvement plan if that school has a consistently underperforming group of students (e.g., African Americans, Latinos, students from low-income families, etc.). The lowest-performing 5 percent of all schools



and high schools that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students also must have school improvement plans.

In the past, some of these plans have not been very effective. Parents and communities can strengthen these plans by (1) helping schools develop them; (2) making sure that proposed interventions meet students' learning needs; and (3) holding schools, districts, and states accountable for results.

Parents should ask their school, district, and state education leaders the following questions about their schools' improvement plans:

1. How will schools and districts involve parents in the development of school improvement plans?
2. How do school and district leaders select interventions for students? How does the school know if those interventions are effective? What will school and district leaders do if these interventions do not improve student achievement?
3. What opportunities will students have to pursue advanced course work and earn college credit(s) while still in high school?

## School and District Report Cards

ESSA requires schools and districts to develop annual "report cards" that provide parents with information about their school's and district's performance. The report cards must include information about the percentage of students who pass the state's reading and math exams, high school graduation rates, suspension/expulsion rates, the percentage of students who have access to advanced course work such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate, school spending, and teacher qualifications (including a comparison of the percentage of inexperienced teachers in high-poverty versus low-poverty schools). To the extent possible, schools and districts must provide these report cards in a language that parents can understand and make them available on state and district websites.

ESSA requires states to involve parents in the development of these report cards. Parents should ask their school, district, and state education leaders the following questions to support their involvement:

1. How will states and districts work with parents to ensure that parents and community members understand state, district, and school report cards?
2. If schools receive an overall letter grade or other summative rating (e.g., 1–5 stars), how much weight will the performance of students of color carry in determining that overall grade? If students of color have low test scores or low high school graduation rates, can a school still receive a high rating?

## Ensuring All Students Count

ESSA requires states, districts, and schools to monitor and report the academic performance of historically underserved groups of students based on their racial/ethnic status, socioeconomic status, English-language ability, and disability status. States then must intervene when these categories of students, known as student "subgroups," consistently perform poorly. Under ESSA, states set the minimum number of students necessary to include one of these student subgroups at the school, district, and state levels. This number also triggers improvement actions for low performance among students in that group. If a subgroup at a school has fewer students than the minimum number set by the state, then that school does not have to report the academic performance or high school graduation rate of that subgroup of students or provide resources targeted specifically to that group.

For example, if a state sets its subgroup number at 30 students and a school has only twenty-nine African American students in a given grade, the school would not have to report the academic achievement or high school graduation rate for those African American students. Furthermore, if the high school graduation rate or academic performance of that group of African American students is low or lags behind the performance of other students in the school, the school would not receive any federal support to address the gap.

This policy exists to protect student privacy and ensure the accuracy of school performance data. However, this policy also can mask student performance since schools do not have to report achievement information for groups that have fewer students than the minimum number set by the state. Different states have different minimum numbers. In some states, schools need only 5 students in a subgroup to report the academic performance of that group. In other states, schools must have 40 or 50 students in a subgroup to report the performance of those students, which means schools may overlook larger numbers of students. (Additional information about this policy is available in the Alliance for Excellent Education report *Ensuring Equity in ESSA: The Role of N-Size in Subgroup Accountability* available at <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/n-size/>.)

States should engage parents and communities in determining the number of students necessary for a school to report the performance of a student subgroup. Parents should ask their school, district, and state education leaders the following questions about this issue:

1. How many African American students must be present for a school to report publicly the performance of African American students and qualify for additional funding if the performance of those students is low?

2. How many more African American students could receive support if the state lowered this number?

## Ongoing Parent Engagement

Parents need involvement in their children's schools on an ongoing basis. To provide opportunities for meaningful parent engagement, ESSA requires schools that receive federal funding for underserved students, under Title I and other programs, to develop parent and family engagement policies. Parents should ask their school, district, and state education leaders the following questions to learn more about ways they can support their children's education:

1. How can parents find information and comment on their district's parent and family engagement policies?
2. How will states and districts ensure that parents receive multiple opportunities to engage with their children's school, including during nonwork hours?

For additional fact sheets and videos about ESSA, visit

[www.all4ed.org/essa/](http://www.all4ed.org/essa/).



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Additional information about school climate is available in the U.S. Department of Education publication "Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline" available at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf>.
- <sup>2</sup> Additional information about student access to college-preparation course work is available from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-resourcecomp-201410.pdf>.

The **Alliance for Excellent Education** is a Washington, DC-based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org)

The **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** is the nation's oldest, largest, and most widely recognized grassroots-based civil rights organization. Its more than half-million members and supporters throughout the United States and the world are the premier advocates for civil rights in their communities, campaigning for equal opportunity and conducting voter mobilization. The mission of the NAACP is to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination. [www.naacp.org](http://www.naacp.org)