

Ensuring Every Student Matters

What Is N-Size and Why Is It Important?

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 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. Yet thirty-six states potentially are ignoring the academic needs of large numbers of African American and Latino students, students from low-income families, English language learners, students with disabilities, and other groups of historically underserved students because the state accountability systems fail to capture these student subgroups.

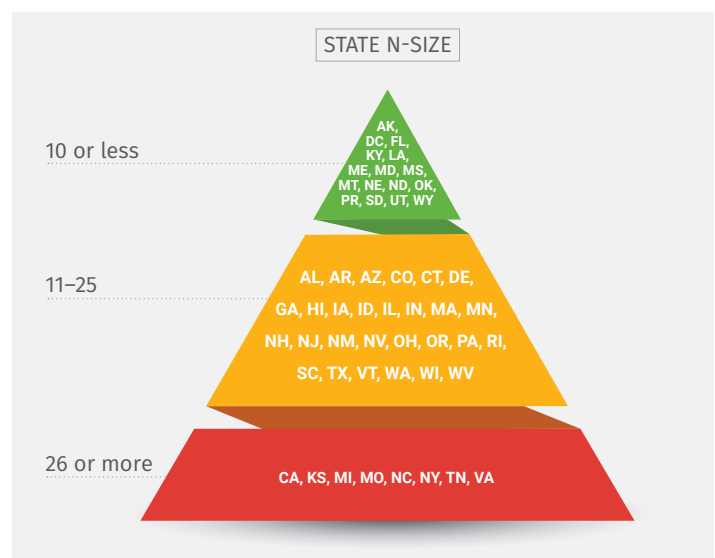
Under ESSA, as under its predecessor the No Child Left Behind Act, states set the minimum number of students necessary to include one of these student subgroups at the school, district, and state levels. This number, referred to as “n-size,” also triggers improvement actions for low performance among students in that group. If a subgroup at a school has fewer students than the state-set n-size, 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 n-size at 30 students and a school has only twenty-nine African American students in a given grade, that subgroup does not exist in the school’s accountability system. 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, a glaring achievement gap exists. Yet the school would not have to report this disparity in achievement nor would it receive any federal support to address the gap.

Under ESSA, states must set their n-size high enough to protect personal information about individual students and also yield

statistically reliable data. However, a significant number of states set their n-size higher than necessary to satisfy these requirements. According to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics, a state can set an n-size of 10 students, and even as low as 5 students, and still protect student privacy and ensure statistical reliability.¹ Currently, though, only fourteen states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico set an n-size of 10 or fewer students, as shown in the graphic below.

Twenty-eight states set the n-size between 11 and 25 students, while eight states set the n-size at 26 or more students. In fact, those eight states set the n-size at 30 students—*three times higher* than necessary to satisfy ESSA’s requirements for student privacy and statistical reliability. Nonetheless, this is an improvement from two years ago when eight states² set the n-size at 40 or more students. For additional information about specific state n-sizes, see the Alliance for Excellent Education’s (All4Ed’s) chart “N-Size in ESSA State Plans” at all4ed.org/N-Size-in-ESSA-State-Plans.



Overall, eighteen states³ and the District of Columbia lowered their n-sizes for accountability within the last two years. Specifically, Kentucky, Montana, and the District of Columbia lowered their n-sizes to 10 or fewer students. States should set their n-size at 10 or fewer students to capture the greatest number of student subgroups for reporting, accountability, and improvement purposes under ESSA. In fact, by lowering their n-size, several states have been able to identify and support substantially more schools and students:

- By lowering its n-size from 25 to 10 students, Kentucky increased by about 15 percentage points the percentage of elementary schools included in the state accountability system based on the performance of African American students.⁴
- When Hawaii lowered its n-size from 40 to 20 students, the state decreased by more than half the number of schools excluded from the state accountability system for the academic performance of students with disabilities from 126 to 44 and those excluded for Latino students from 103 to 43.⁵
- By lowering its n-size from 30 to 15 students, Ohio more than doubled the number of schools responsible for the academic performance of Latino students (from 436 to 902 schools) and those accountable for Asian or Pacific Islander students (from 154 to 356 schools). Similarly, by lowering its n-size, Ohio now includes an additional 20,000 students with disabilities in its accountability system.⁶

More states should follow these examples and structure their accountability and support systems to expand, rather than limit, the number of student subgroups included in those systems. By setting an n-size of 10 or fewer students, states can identify and support the most underserved students and ensure they receive the interventions and services afforded under ESSA they need to succeed.



For additional information about n-size, read All4Ed's report *Ensuring Equity in ESSA: The Role of N-Size in Subgroup Accountability* at all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/n-size/. To learn more about individual state ESSA policies, visit all4ed.org/essa/essa-in-your-state/.

Endnotes

- ¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Statistical Methods for Protecting Personally Identifiable Information in Aggregate Reporting (NCES 2011–603), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011603.pdf> (accessed March 21, 2016).
- ² The states that lowered their n-sizes from 40 students are Arizona, California, Hawaii, Illinois, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oregon, and Vermont.
- ³ The states that lowered their n-sizes are Arizona, Arkansas, California, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Vermont, and Washington.
- ⁴ Kentucky Department of Education, Commonwealth of Kentucky Revised Consolidated State Plan Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, p. 41, <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplan17/kyconsolidatedstateplan.pdf> (accessed October 19, 2018).
- ⁵ Hawaii State Department of Education, Hawaii Consolidated State Plan: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as Amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act, p. 30, <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplan17/hiconsolidatedstateplanfinal.pdf> (accessed October 19, 2018).
- ⁶ Ohio Department of Education, Revised State Template for the Consolidated State Plan: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as Amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act, p. 13–14, <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplan17/ohconsolidatedstateplanfinal.pdf> (accessed October 19, 2018).



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