

Opportunities for Delaware under the Every Student Succeeds Act

October 26th, 2016
Steven H. Godowsky, Secretary of Education
401 Federal Street, Suite 2
Dover, DE 19901-3639

Dear Secretary Godowsky,

Last year, after President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law, many community-based organizations in Delaware wondered about the implications for Delaware's education system. Now, as details on the biggest and most recent federal K-12 law abound, many of these groups are excited about the unique opportunity ESSA presents for states such as Delaware to improve its education system for all kids.

Where possible, many of our organizations have participated in the opportunities created by the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) to provide input on the transition to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for the state. We have joined the various forums where the DDOE has solicited input on a variety of different questions, including:

- What measures should be used to determine if students are ready for success at the next level (elementary, middle, high school and beyond)?
- What measures should be used to determine the quality of our public schools, and how do those measures differ for elementary, middle and high schools?
- What information should be reported to the public on the quality of public schools?
- What additional indicators should be considered to measure school performance?

Outside of those DDOE-led forums, we have connected with our constituency groups and other community organizations to reflect upon our responses to those questions and our priorities for the state's ESSA plan. As a diverse collection of organizations, our individual priorities are varied: from improving school capacity for family and community engagement; to addressing inequities in teaching quality as a key driver of student outcomes; to exploring innovative measures of student success.

Thus, this letter does not capture all of our hopes and plans for strengthening Delaware's education system. It provides an initial response and focused set of recommendations, specifically related to accountability and reporting under ESSA, formulated by a growing collection of grassroots and community-based organizations. We anticipate sharing additional recommendations on other aspects of ESSA and expanding our membership and perspective as the conversation develops.

Participating organizations



EL TIEMPO HISPANO



WILMINGTON EDUCATION STRATEGY THINK TANK (WESTT)



TEACHFORAMERICA

Our Recommendations for Accountability and Reporting

We have seen pockets of success for Delaware children over the last few years. Yet, we still have a long way to go before we can claim every Delaware student is receiving the high-quality education he or she deserves. We have persistent achievement gaps along lines of race, income, and ability, and gaps between which students have the opportunity to advance beyond high school and which do not. In 2014, more than 40 percent of all Delaware public high school graduates who matriculated into Delaware colleges began their college experience in remedial courses. Students of color, students with disabilities, and low-income students were even more likely to begin their postsecondary studies behind with remediation rates ranging from 50 to 77 percent.¹

1. <http://www.rodelfoundationde.org/ata glance/#college-career>

ESSA offers us an opportunity to turn the tide for Delaware students and renew our commitment and urgency toward ensuring equity for every student. Now is the time to reset the narrative around school accountability and ensure that we have a transparent, comprehensive system to identify schools that need support and to provide them the resources and assistance they need to provide high-quality learning opportunities for students.

Delaware has a strong foundation to build upon. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. Our accountability system should build upon the work that has already been done by the Accountability Framework Working Group (AFWG) and reflect the recommendations made in Student Success 2025, Delaware’s Excellent Educators for All Plan, the Early Childhood Council Strategic Plan, the goals of the Hispanic Commission Education Sub-Committee, the work of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission and the Wilmington Education Advisory Committee, and by countless others that have been working for years to improve educational outcomes for Delaware students.

Our recommendations for strengthening Delaware’s accountability system are grounded in the following beliefs:

We must keep
students and student learning at the center of the system

We must build
a strong accountability system to ensure struggling students, teachers, and schools are clearly identified in order to get the resources they need to improve.

We must share
a sense of urgency for our students, families, and community

To stay true to our shared beliefs and achieve our objectives, we recommend policymakers incorporate the following principles into Delaware’s accountability system:

- 1) Students, and student learning should be the focus of an accountability system.
- 2) Accountability indicators should be meaningful and differentiate schools’ capacity to prepare students for long-term success.
- 3) Delaware should be a national leader for English learners.
- 4) Delaware should adopt a meaningful and rigorous measure of school quality.
- 5) Families, educators and communities should be full partners in school accountability.

Principle 1—Students, and student learning should be the focus of an accountability system.

Our current accountability system is centered around student learning. The Delaware School Success Framework (DSSF), heavily weights academic achievement and student growth, making student learning a significant portion of Delaware’s system. We believe this is the right focus of a school accountability system.

However, Delaware should embrace this opportunity to strengthen our current measure for student growth:

We could measure students’ growth relative to their peers *and* an absolute standard. By continuing to include a relative calculation of student growth, comparing students’ growth against the growth of their peers, and incorporating a calculation of growth to proficiency, based on calculating the growth toward an absolute standard for all students, we can strengthen our academic achievement indicators under ESSA. Today, we only include growth to proficiency in our college and career readiness indicators for elementary and middle

students. Instead, combining both indicators of growth to measure and rate schools will hold a high bar for all students, regardless of background or previous testing performance, while acknowledging and rewarding schools that make progress with students that have traditionally underperformed.

We should ensure as many students as possible in our system will be counted and included in accountability. Under ESSA, states must set their n-size high enough to protect personal information about individual students and also yield statistically reliable data. According to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics,² 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. Delaware’s current n-size for accountability is 30. Given Delaware’s relative size, we recommend adopting a smaller “n” size of 10 to ensure the privacy of all students and schools, while directing resources and support to as many students as possible³.

2. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/2011/2011603.pdf>

3. <http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/N-Size-Fact-Sheet-July-2016.pdf>

Principle 2—Accountability indicators should be meaningful and differentiate schools’ capacity to prepare students for long-term success.

We must develop accountability systems that meaningfully differentiate schools that consistently meet expectations and those that do not. Our current accountability system measures average daily attendance for elementary and middle schools as an indicator of whether students are “on-track to graduation”. But this indicator does not meaningfully differentiate across schools and therefore almost all schools are guaranteed high ratings on this indicator. Instead, Delaware should measure chronic absenteeism, which differentiates among schools more clearly and, based on research, is a better indicator for identifying students who are less likely to graduate on-time.⁴

4. <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronic-absenteeism.html#four>

Principle 3—Delaware should be a national leader for English learners.

We must place much greater focus on the success of English learners in Delaware. Delaware does not currently include English learner proficiency as part of its school accountability system. This is now required by ESSA. For years, English learners (ELs) have been left behind and overlooked. Delaware should take advantage of the requirement within ESSA to measure the proficiency of ELs and become a national leader for ensuring ELs are identified and supported in high-quality ways. Specifically, we should adopt multiple measures of English learning proficiency, such as a composite indicator that includes:

- A measure of student growth on English learning proficiency assessment;
- The number of ELs *no longer identified* as ELs divided by the *total number* of ELs, also known as a ‘reclassification rate’; and
- The number/percentage of long-term ELs (students who are not proficient after five or more years as ELs)

In addition, Delaware should set ambitious goals for ELs, ensuring that we hold high expectations for ELs to reach English-language proficiency within a reasonable timeframe.⁵

Principle 4—Delaware should adopt a meaningful and rigorous measure of school quality.

We must ensure the indicators of school quality and student success that Delaware chooses are based in sound, high-quality research. ESSA requires an indicator of school quality or student success that states can determine on their own. The indicators we choose should be linked to research into what will increase achievement and improve postsecondary success for Delaware students.

Delaware should consider the following indicators as measures of school quality:

- School discipline, specifically the rates at which students are out of class for discipline purposes, and
- A comparable, rigorous and meaningful measure of college and career readiness.

Principle 5—Families, educators and communities should be full partners in school accountability.

Delaware’s accountability system should clearly communicate whether schools are meeting expectations for all groups of students in a manner that is accessible to families.

Delaware’s current DSSF does not include a single summary rating for schools and districts that is inclusive of all indicators and their weights. The state should include this in order to ensure clarity for parents and community members.

However, the components that make up that rating should also remain and be clearly delineated.

Families, educators and community members should have the information about school quality that they need and be included as key partners in the school improvement process.

Finally, these constituencies should be engaged regularly—in a manner that is responsive to their diverse needs—for the ongoing development of the state accountability system.

Thank you in advance for considering the recommendations above.