

**Making the Most of ESSA:
20 Questions for Developing and Implementing Strong State ESSA Plans
That Advance College and Career Readiness and Equity**

ESSA provides states and districts with new authority and responsibility to design and implement education systems that can best promote equity and advance college and career ready outcomes for all students. But how can states and stakeholders get the most out of ESSA? What would the best ESSA implementation include to advance shifts in teaching, learning, and student supports based on data and evidence to ensure that all students can master the deeper learning knowledge and skills necessary for success in college and career? Based on our analysis of the law and our review of nearly all states' draft ESSA plans in some form, the following are 20 questions for states and stakeholders to ask about their ESSA plans and implementation -- including plans for federal review and other state plans for effective implementation. This tool is intended to help states and stakeholders consider if they are best using ESSA in their unique context to advance success in college and career among all students, including a particular eye toward closing gaps in success. These questions are drawn from our guide – *Making the Most of ESSA: 20 Ideas for How to Leverage ESSA to Advance College and Career Readiness and Equity* -- that includes detailed explanations of ESSA levers and state examples.

20 Questions for Advancing College and Career Readiness and Equity

1. **Vision:** Does the state set a clear "North Star" across its ESSA plan and implementation strategies by defining college and career ready deeper learning outcomes the system must advance for all students including: rigorous academic content knowledge, the ability to think critically and solve problems, the ability to work collaboratively and communicate effectively, and the ability to direct one's learning with a strong academic mindset?
2. **Theory of Action:** Does the state's ESSA plan have a clear theories of action based on evidence that explain how its strategies in each section will advance college and career ready deeper learning outcomes, and particularly how it will close gaps in opportunity and achievement?
3. **Standards:** Does the state establish and maintain challenging state academic standards that are rigorous and aligned with college and career ready expectations that reflect to the fullest extent the knowledge and skills necessary for success?
4. **Long-Term Goals:** Has the state set ambitious but achievable long-term goals aligned to college and career ready attainment, with expectations for gap-closure, for academic achievement, graduation rates, and English language proficiency at a minimum - and for other key indicators such as "9th grade on-track", or postsecondary enrollment and/or persistence without the need for remediation?
5. **Summative Assessment:** Does the state have and maintain high-quality summative assessments that cover the full depth and breadth of knowledge, skills, and rigor needed for success in college and careers, with all appropriate accommodations and alternative assessments needed for students with disabilities and English learners? (This includes any locally-selected, nationally recognized summative high school assessments and may include assessments that are delivered in part through projects, portfolios, or extended-performance tasks.) Is the state taking steps to develop, pilot, and evaluate innovative, high-quality assessments – including competency-based and performance-based assessments – such as through the demonstration authority for innovative assessment pilots?
6. **High-quality System of Assessments:** Is the state taking steps to build, and help districts build, a high-quality, balanced, and aligned *system* of assessments (including, for example, formative, interim, summative, and performance assessments) that can best support excellent teaching and college and career ready learning? Is the state planning to use assessment audits or other strategies to build and enhance system quality while also reducing burden?
7. **Accountability Indicators and Measures:** Does the state's accountability system include multiple measures that are aligned with college and career ready outcomes and reflect a range of knowledge, skills, opportunities, and conditions that are important to success, including measures of school quality and/or student success?
8. **Data Dashboards and Reporting:** Does the state plan to use (and encourage districts to use) a high-quality data dashboard or other matrix to report on an array of timely, actionable, relevant data - including for accountability and school improvement - that can be used by all stakeholders to inform the improvement of schools, strategies, and systems?

9. **Deeper Diagnostic Review:** Does the state have a system and capacity for deeper diagnostic review of data to inform continuous improvement in all schools and districts, with a particular focus on low-performing schools, districts, and subgroups?
10. **School Improvement Resources and Plans:** Does the state have plans for a system to improve all schools, and particularly low-performing schools, including state levers such as model needs assessments, technical assistance to districts, funding criteria, performance management systems for school improvement plans, and continuous improvement strategies? Does the plan advance evidence-based elements for improving schools such as teacher and leader effectiveness strategies, strategies addressing the effects of adversity on students, accelerated learning opportunities, and teaching aligned to the full array of college and career ready knowledge and skills?
11. **Direct Student Services:** Will the state leverage up to 3% of Title I funds for "direct student services" in ways that will support students in becoming college and career ready, such as accelerated and personalized learning opportunities, rigorous career and technical education, and student academic and non-academic supports?
12. **Teacher and Leader Preparation:** Has the state engaged educator and leader preparation programs and other partners and will it leverage Title II funds to align educator and leader preparation programs and/or certification and licensure with expectations that lead to the full range of college and career ready outcomes among all students?
13. **Systems of Professional Development:** Is the state leveraging Title II funds to develop school-level learning systems that align to ESSA's new definition of professional development? Do they particularly promote continuous improvement for teachers and leaders to improve their practice and further advance college and career ready student outcomes?
14. **School Leadership:** Has the state expressly focused on improving the quality of school leaders in ways that promote deeper learning, and improving access to high-quality school leaders across districts, particularly for low-performing schools, such as through use of the 3% Title II set aside or other Title II activities?
15. **Student Supports and Academic Enrichment:** Will the state target its Title IV Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants towards strategies that best advance college and career ready deeper learning and equity? For example, will the state use these funds to provide equitable access to a rigorous well-rounded education, student-centered learning experiences leading to mastery of deeper learning knowledge and skills, and academic and non-academic supports that meet students' unique needs?
16. **High-Quality Early Learning:** Has the state identified strategies throughout the ESSA plan and implementation to improve access to high-quality early learning as part of an integrated, equitable continuum of education towards college and career success? Does the state leverage strategies and resources to accomplish this such as professional development, support to programs, aligned standards, data sharing, school improvement, and a focus on transition?
17. **Stakeholder Engagement:** Does the state have and maintain robust systems of stakeholder engagement in place (including ongoing "grassroots" engagement and structures for regular "grasstops" engagement embedded in state implementation) that inform state decisions and also foster public understanding of and support for college and career ready strategies and equity as part of ESSA?
18. **State Continuous Improvement Processes Based on Evidence:** Has the state established clear systems, processes, and capacity for ongoing evaluation, review, and continuous improvement across all parts of its plan, based on data and evidence?
19. **Local Plans:** Does the state have a state-to-local strategy that advances the dual goals of college and career ready outcomes and equity at the district level? For example, do the state's plans for designing, reviewing, approving, and monitoring local educational agencies' ESSA plans and providing differentiated technical assistance to LEAs create a clear through-line that advances deeper learning at the state *and* local level?
20. **Innovation Zones and Waivers:** Has the state considered establishing innovation zones across ready districts that accelerate development of new models and systems advancing college and career readiness and equity such as improved assessment systems, additional accountability measures for the full range of college and career ready outcomes, and whole-child personalization strategies? Where needed and educationally sound, does the state have a strategy to use ESSA waiver authority to implement educational strategies that go above and beyond the statute in advancing college and career readiness and equity?