



Comments on Implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act

Joint Public Hearing of the House and Senate Education Committees May 18, 2016

Chairman Smucker, Chairman Dinniman, Chairman Saylor, Chairman Roebuck and members of the Senate and House Education Committees, thank you for providing the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA) the opportunity to share our perspective on the opportunities and challenges concerning implementation of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) by the Commonwealth. Our members include school district superintendents and other chief school system leaders engaged in the ongoing work of improving and enhancing student achievement in Pennsylvania.

I will begin with a few observations about the legacy of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) before moving on to share some thoughts about specific education policies that are to be addressed by states under ESSA. Although there is much to talk about when it comes to a comprehensive law that is nearly 1,000 pages in length, I will then focus my testimony on six principal areas: standards, assessment, accountability, teacher quality, funding and NCLB policy legacy. I hope we will have additional opportunities to share our insights on other aspects of ESSA as the committees continue their work.

Pennsylvania and its public schools have lived under the NCLB or NCLB federal waiver conditions for the past 14 years. During that 14-year period, four Governors, four chairmen of the Senate Education Committee, four chairmen of the House Education Committee and eight Secretaries of Education each had a role in the development or revision of state policies needed to comply with NCLB. An entire generation of students was educated under the high-stakes testing era that was NCLB. Several high school graduating classes spent their entire educational experience under NCLB, and state policies that were put in place to comply with the federal requirements. And tens of thousands of teachers now providing instruction in classrooms across the state were trained and certified under NCLB requirements.

It is hard to recall what our public education system was like before NCLB. In 1999, just two years prior to passage of NCLB, Pennsylvania adopted a new system of learning and accountability that established state academic standards and aligned state assessments designed to drive instruction and to measure student, school and school district academic success. Academic standards were initially adopted in reading, writing, speaking and listening and mathematics, and the Pennsylvania System of School Assessments (PSSA) that were administered in grades 3, 5, 8 and 11 in reading, writing and mathematics were aligned to measure student achievement of the standards. School and district report cards provided parents and taxpayers a comprehensive picture of academic performance, staffing, instructional resources and other useful information. A new school district-based system of accountability had just been implemented through the Education Empowerment Act. Pennsylvania was widely recognized as having one of most rigorous standards for teacher certification of any state.

Pennsylvania had the fundamental education policy framework in place when NCLB became law. But due to the highly prescriptive federal requirements, the Commonwealth was required to change many of its existing policies and requirements. These policies and practices are now ingrained into the very fabric of Pennsylvania's public education system. Hundreds of millions of local and state taxpayer dollars were spent to comply with the federal NCLB requirements. Federal funding did not scratch the surface of covering the increased costs associated with complying with the federal requirements.

It is clearly an intent of Congress in ESSA to return policymaking authority back to states and local school districts in reaction to the years of federal overreach under NCLB and NCLB waivers. The question for state policymakers is whether they will use this opportunity to merely tweak the existing system to simply comply with the minimum federal requirements – or whether they will use this once-in-a-decade opportunity to start fresh and create a new, coherent, balanced and aligned system that is designed to prepare students for whatever their future brings.

ESSA requires states to establish rigorous academic standards, measure student achievement against those standards, establish school report cards, intervene in the lowest performing schools and ensure effective teachers are equitably distributed among schools throughout the state. ESSA also consolidates and restructures several programs that were categorical grants under NCLB.

I will now share our several suggestions about each of these major policy issues.

Standards

PASA urges state policymakers to maintain the current Pennsylvania Core Standards in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science and Technology that were promulgated in March 2014. These academic standards drive curriculum design and instructional practice, selection and use of textbooks and instructional materials, local and state assessments, including benchmark assessments, and the PSSA and Keystone Exams. Revising the standards has a significant price tag and causes considerable disruption in the continuity of instruction and student achievement. We strongly recommend the existing Pennsylvania Core Standards remain in place.

ESSA seeks to restore balance in the curriculum that was lost with NCLB. Therefore, we recommend that the State Board of Education update the other eight sets of state academic standards that have not been revised since the Board originally issued them in 2003. These standards, which are long overdue for an update, include the state academic standards for environment and ecology, history, civics and government, economics, geography, arts and humanities, health fitness and physical education, and career education and work.

Assessment

ESSA does not change the number of standardized tests that states must administer in grades 3 through 8 and once at the high school level from what was required under NCLB. But it does provide additional flexibility to states in the design of those assessments. Pennsylvania wisely choose to continue to administer its own tests rather than use either the Common Core tests developed by either the Smarter Balanced or PARCC state coalition developed tests, which have experienced considerable test administration challenges. PASA suggests that we continue to reject the use of either one of these state consortia-developed assessments.

Rather, we suggest the Commonwealth take advantage of the option provided by ESSA to eliminate the requirement that 8th grade students take both the Algebra Keystone Exam and math PSSA in the same year. Obviously, having students take two standardized state tests in the same subject in the same year poses a major burden, both for the student **and** the school. ESSA provides states the option to have these students skip the 8th grade PSSA. These students would then be required to take a higher-level math assessment in 11th grade.

Another option provided by ESSA is that the state can permit school districts to use nationally recognized high school assessments in lieu of the Keystone Exams. Permitting districts to use

this option, by using the SAT or ACT in place of Keystone Exams, would reduce the testing burden for students and schools while lowering assessment costs to the Commonwealth.

One issue that requires careful consideration is reviewing the current state board policy that permits parents to opt their child out from taking the state assessments. ESSA maintains the 95 percent threshold for test participation. Under NCLB, failure to reach the 95 percent threshold triggers the designation of the school as “failing.” Under ESSA, states and school districts determine what happens to schools that miss the target. Given the increasing numbers of parents who are choosing an “opt-out” in state standardized tests for their children, this will be an important issue going forward.

Accountability

If there is one legacy from which states must move away, it is the punitive and ineffective accountability provisions mandated under NCLB. While the accountability and school improvement process developed under the state’s NCLB waiver was a vast improvement over the NCLB provisions, it continued to place far too much weight on state standardized test scores in just three subjects.

Our collective goal must be to prepare students for success beyond graduation from high school. A relevant 21st century education includes providing access to high-level academic coursework and early college credits, opportunities to complete industry credentials and participate in career internships while in high school, and opportunities to participate in co-curricular activities and community service projects that build teamwork and soft-skills.

ESSA provides broad flexibility to states to develop a new comprehensive school accountability system for public schools. It provides states the ability to broaden the indicators used to measure student and school success. The first order of business then must be to improve and update the School Performance Profile. The School Performance Profile must include and provide greater weight to factors other than standardized test scores and value-added results.

The accountability provisions of ESSA empower state and local education agencies to shape their accountability policies in a way that diminishes continued overreliance on high-stakes, one-time standardized testing. In designing the school accountability policy, now represented by the School Performance Profiles, academic factors must represent at least 51 percent of all indicators, meaning that up to 49% of the accountability construct can be focused on other factors, which can include also non-academic factors.

The Profile and school accountability system should take a holistic approach and focus on the effectiveness of our schools in preparing students to be college, career and life ready. PASA supports the work of the “Redefining Ready!” initiative which, based on research, redefines the indicators that can and should be used to measure student and school success away from the narrow focus on assessment results required under NCLB. Attached to my testimony is more information about “Redefining Reading!” and provides details as to college, career and life ready indicators that should be used to measure school success in the School Performance Profile.

States must identify and intervene in schools in the bottom five percent and in high schools that graduate less than 67% of their students. States will generate this list every three years, and states will establish the exit criteria for moving out of turn-around status. PASA previously provided testimony regarding its recommended strategies to turn around and improve the performance of the state’s five percent lowest performing schools when the Senate Education Committee was considering Senate Bill 6. We would be pleased to share those recommendations with you.

Teacher Quality

Perhaps the least understood and most costly component of NCLB was the requirement that teachers be “highly qualified.” This requirement forced the Department of Education and State Board of Education to revise their teacher preparation and certification requirements and forced districts to hire additional teachers or spend taxpayer funds for teachers to take additional college courses or pass PRAXIS tests so they could add certification areas to their list of teaching certificates necessary to comply with this federal requirement. The highly qualified teacher requirement limited previous flexibility provided to school district administrators to assign teachers to grade levels where they were most needed due to an overly restrictive definition of what it meant to be a “highly qualified” teacher. In Pennsylvania this meant the long-standing practice of permitting elementary certified teachers to teach grades 7 and 8 was discontinued, with those affected either having to add middle school certification to their certificates or move back to only teach in grades K – 6.

ESSA restores much of the previous flexibility available to states. ESSA now requires states only to ensure there is equitable distribution of highly effective teachers, meaning that low performing schools should not have less experienced, ineffective or out-of-field teachers than other schools across the state. It is a universal challenge that the lowest performing schools have the least experienced and effective teachers. The challenge of attracting and supporting the best teachers to work in the most challenging schools with students with the greatest needs

is one faced by states and schools throughout the nation. PASA suggests the state provide incentives to attract experienced, highly effective teachers to work in the most challenging schools in the state. PASA also recommends that the Department and State Board of Education return flexibility regarding grade level certifications back to school districts that existed prior to the NCLB highly qualified teacher requirements.

Another significant change in federal policy made in ESSA is that it eliminates all federal mandates regarding teacher and principal evaluation systems. Under the federal Race-to-the-Top grants and NCLB waiver, the U.S. Department of Education required states to establish new teacher and principal rating systems that include student achievement measures that comprise at least 50 percent of the total evaluation. As you know, this requirement was adopted into state law as a key feature of the new educator effectiveness system in 2012. We now have several years' experience evaluating staff under the new requirements. While it has many positive features and benefits, superintendents throughout the state are frustrated by a serious flaw in the new system. That flaw makes it nearly impossible to provide a poorly performing teacher with an unsatisfactory rating, which means a superintendent cannot use a performance rating as the basis for terminating employment.

ESSA provides the Senate and House Education Committees the opportunity to correct this flaw and to provide a more appropriate balance and weight to student achievement factors used in the educator effectiveness system.

Funding

Pennsylvania and its public schools receive more than \$600 million in funding through NCLB and now ESSA each year. While Title I funds, the largest category of federal funds received under ESSA, will use the same distribution formula used under NCLB, a new formula will be phased in over the next five years for Title II funding. Title II funds support professional development, curriculum development and innovative programs. This change will be phased in over the next five years and will result in Pennsylvania losing more than \$10 million in annual Title II funding. School districts rely on these funds, so it is important to keep this mind in the future when the committees are considering legislation that mandates additional training and professional development requirements.

Like the ongoing debate in the General Assembly over the basic education funding formula, a similar debate took place in Congress over distribution of federal education funding to states. As a state that stands to lose federal funding, should the Title I formula be revised, we need to

be vigilant to ensure that Pennsylvania does not face even greater cuts should proponents of changing the Title I formula finally win the day in Washington.

NCLB Legacy Policies

Over the past 14 years, NCLB requirements have become imbedded in nearly every aspect of public education, from teacher preparation to sharing student information with military recruiters.

As the No Child Left Behind Act sunsets into the history books, on the federal level it leaves behind a lasting legacy of literally dozens of provisions in the Public School Code, state regulations, certification standards and Department of Education policies. Most of these provisions are not readily identifiable or associated with NCLB, so the task of identifying them is a challenge. There are obvious examples, such as Department of Education's Chapter 403 regulations, entitled "Compliance with NCLB Act of 2001." An example of a hard-to-identify provision is Section 116 of the Public School Code. It provides for the Department of Education to provide technical assistance and information to a school district or school identified for warning, school improvement or corrective action. Another such provision is Section 222, that provides for the collection and reporting of graduation rates and dropout data necessary to meet federal reporting requirements.

The challenge for state policymakers will be to identify all these hidden NCLB policies and either update them to reflect ESSA requirements, maintain or repeal them. This same challenge faces school administrators and school boards, as they too must review school district policies to perform a similar review.

We suggest that a comprehensive review of state statutory and regulatory provisions adopted since 2002 be performed to compile a list of items that were adopted to comply with NCLB and the NCLB waiver. In addition, the Department of Education should likewise undertake a comprehensive review of its Basic Education Circulars, guidelines, grant requirements, and certification policies to also identify those items that were adopted or revised to comply with NCLB.

Conclusion

As with any major piece of federal legislation that is nearly 1,000 pages long, ESSA will take several years to implement. Best estimates suggest federal regulations will be issued in fall 2016. However, we will then have a new President in the White House and likely a new federal

Secretary of Education, who may or may not have other plans in mind for ESSA. That being said, Pennsylvania policymakers do have the luxury of having several months to discuss and develop the framework for the next generation of standards, assessments, accountability and teacher quality that will guide Pennsylvania's public education system well into the next decade.

PASA stands ready to assist the Committees in this difficult but critical work.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspectives with you today.



College Ready Indicators

Students are **College Ready** if they meet either the academic or standardized testing benchmarks listed below.

GPA 2.8 out of 4.0 and **one or more** of the following benchmarks:

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- Advanced Placement Exam (3+)
 - Advanced Placement Course (A, B or C)
 - Dual Credit College English and/or Math (A, B or C)
 - College Developmental/Remedial English and/or Math (A, B or C)
 - Algebra II (A, B or C)
 - International Baccalaureate Exam (4+)
 - College Readiness Placement Assessment*

***Standardized Test benchmarks (minimum score)**

SAT Exam: Math (TBD) | Reading and Writing (TBD)

ACT Exam: English (18) | Reading (22) | Science (23) | Math (22)

Additional Factors that Contribute to College Success

Earning As, Bs, Cs; FAFSA completion; enrollment in career pathway course sequence; college academic advising; participation in college bound bridge programs; senior year math class; completion of a math class after Algebra II.

Career Ready Indicators

Students are **Career Ready** if they have identified a career interest and meet two of the behavioral and experiential benchmarks listed below. In addition, students entering the military upon graduation must meet the passing scores on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) for each branch of the military.

Career Cluster Identified and **two or more** of the following benchmarks:

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- 90% Attendance
 - 25 hours of Community Service
 - Workplace Learning Experience
 - Industry Credential
 - Dual Credit Career Pathway Course
 - Two or more organized Co-Curricular Activities
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Life Ready

Being **Life Ready** means students leave high school with the grit and perseverance to tackle and achieve their goals.

Students who are **Life Ready** possess the growth mindset that empowers them to approach their future with confidence, to dream big and to achieve big.

Our nation's schools provide social and emotional support and experiences to equip students with the **Life Ready** skills they will need for success in their future.



Redefining Ready! for the 21st Century

Preparing students for success beyond graduation is among the most important tasks facing America's educators, and they have responded with innovative determination, creating a relevant 21st century education that includes increased access to Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses and early college credits that better position students for success; opportunities to complete industry credentials and college-level and career internships while still in high school; and rich exposure to co-curricular activities and community service projects that build skills for life.

Consequently, students should be able to demonstrate their readiness in ways other than solely standardized test scores. While standardized test scores are widely accepted as one key readiness indicator in our schools, they fail to show the whole picture – often inappropriately suggesting only a portion of students are college ready when in fact many more graduates successfully pursue two-year and four-year degrees.

Ready for College

Research from world-class organizations indicates numerous factors that can significantly and more authentically demonstrate college, career and life readiness, including a 2.8 or higher Grade Point Average (GPA), enrollment in AP and IB classes and success on AP and IB exams, early college credits, completion of industry credentials, attendance records, participation in activities and community service.

Data from The National Center for Postsecondary Research, The Diploma Project, the Center for Public Education, the National Center for Education Statistics and others suggest the power of these varying metrics in assessing readiness. Specifically, a 2013 report published by the American Institutes for Research highlighted multiple indicators for success, including participation in dual-enrollment coursework, a score of 3 or higher on AP exams and FAFSA completion.

In 2010, the College Board released a report that specifically emphasized the need for multiple measures of readiness in preparing students for success.

In a University of California study, high school GPA was consistently found to be one of the strongest predictors of four-year college outcomes across all academic disciplines, campuses and freshmen cohorts in the research sample.

Moreover, a Brown University study has found that the courses students take in high school are more predictive of college success than family income and race.

AP coursework success is a widely accepted indicator of college readiness in university applications, and is used to rate and rank the rigor and excellence of high schools for nationally published lists by news organizations like *U.S. News & World Report*. Several studies have highlighted how performance in AP courses relates to college access and success showing that there is a strong relationship between high school students who take and pass AP exams and those who complete college.



Eighty-two percent of the nation's high schools report their students are enrolled in dual credit courses, according to a 2013 report by the National Center for Educational Statistics, concluding this also must be considered a readiness factor. Such courses offer students the opportunity to earn college credit while still in high school and later ease the transition to a post-secondary academic setting. In looking at data from Florida schools, the National Center for Postsecondary Research found that dual-enrollment students were statistically more significantly likely to persist in college to a second semester and earn a higher college GPA. In addition, male and low-income students, in particular, benefited from dual-enrollment courses in high school.

Additionally, studies show that successful high school completion of Algebra II, a gateway course for many post-secondary math, science, engineering and technology courses, correlates to college and career success. Data links Algebra II success to both college enrollment and bachelor's degree attainment: Students who study math at least through Algebra II in high school are more than twice as likely to earn a four-year degree as those who do not, and the level of math a student reaches in high school is the most accurate predictor of whether they will earn a bachelor's degree.

Success within an International Baccalaureate (IB) program is also predictive of readiness, with research from the Educational Policy Improvement Center determining students who participated in an IB program in high school were more likely than those who did not to earn post-secondary degrees and persist over two years while earning higher GPAs in their first two years of college. The impact on low-achieving students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds is particularly profound; those who took an AP or IB course were found to be 17 percent more likely to persist in four-year colleges and 30 percent more likely to persist in two-year colleges than peers who did not take the coursework.

Ready for Careers

Preparing students to enter two-year and four-year institutions of higher education is an integral piece of the readiness equation. In addition to college readiness, we cannot underestimate the importance of identifying students who are ready to enter the workforce after leaving high school, particularly given the abundance of idea-driven and high-profile middle-skill jobs that do not require a full college degree.

In 1988, the William T. Grant Foundation published a report that called the then 20 million non-college-bound youth the "forgotten half," warning they were "in danger of being caught in a massive bind that can deny them full participation in our society." A narrowly defined "college for all" goal – one that does not include a strong focus on career-oriented programs that lead to occupational credentials – appears doomed to fail.

More than two decades later, the Harvard Graduate School of Education published the Pathways to Prosperity Project in 2011, calling on America's high schools to increase work-based learning to equip those students who do not finish four years of college for success in the workplace.

Students need hands-on workplace learning experiences such as internships that enable them to explore their career interests while still in high school. The National Career Clusters® Framework is comprised of 16 Career Clusters and related Career Pathways to help students explore different career options. Identifying a career pathway is critical since it provides exposure to coursework directly related to a future career and often leads to an industry credential that allows students to be immediately employable upon graduation.



Research shows that students often lack the knowledge of the requirements for specific careers. One study highlighted the fact that young men in Career Academies earned more after high school because of their participation in internships and improved awareness of specific careers.

When students' interests and career aspirations are explored and connected through curriculum, their high school experience is elevated, with research showing career pathways in education can make school real, relevant and exciting to students and answer the "Why do we need to learn this?" question across courses. In particular, an *EdWeek* article noted the impact of internships on high school students, by equipping them with real-world skills including communications and teamwork.

Data shows school attendance, something at the very core of education, is central to success. In a report by Attendance Works, absenteeism influences not just chances for graduating but also for completing college. An analysis of Rhode Island data found that only 11 percent of chronically absent students who graduated from high school made it to a second year of college.

Additionally, civically engaged students make greater scholastic progress during high school, with data showing that community service to fulfill class requirements enhances the average odds of college graduation by 22 percentage points.

Finally, co-curricular activities promote student achievement, engagement and attitudes that lead to college aspirations and ultimately success, according to a study by the National Center for Educational Statistics and the U.S. Department of Education. The study indicated students involved in activities were more likely to aspire to higher education, and two-thirds were expected to complete a bachelor's degree or higher.

Redefining Ready!

It is imperative that we consider multiple metrics when assessing readiness for life after high school. We know that our students are more than one standardized test score and using a "one score judges all" approach is simply unfair to our students, our teachers, our school boards and our communities. We need a more authentic, appropriate, and relevant definition of readiness in this country.

We are educating a generation of innovators – motivated by ideas and ingenuity. They learn in a variety of ways. And, they should be able to demonstrate college, career and life readiness in a variety of ways. A multitude of decisions are based on student readiness including college acceptance, which oftentimes sets a course for a student's success in career and life.

Higher education institutions and businesses will have a broader look into a student's commitment, character and resilience rather than basing their decisions on a standardized test score that may or may not accurately reflect a student's readiness level.

This new definition provides a full picture of how well students are prepared for a 21st century workforce that relies on creativity, vision, communication and other skills that cannot be measured through standardized tests.