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The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): What It Means for Educators of Students at Risk

Abstract

This editorial perspective examines some ways that the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which becomes operational in the 2017–2018 school year, may enhance the capacity of educators to help students and schools at risk of underperforming. It also addresses some of the challenges that educators will face under ESSA in ensuring success for all students. We highlight aspects of ESSA that may be of most interest to our readers including the broadened definition of academic success, expansion of subgroups for data reporting, emphasis on evidence-based research and practice, focus on continuous improvement, and need for increased educator understanding of research and evaluation. Resources are included that provide information for educators on how to use evidence, locate research findings on existing interventions, and access funding opportunities.

Keywords

ESSA, academic success, evidence-based practice, continuous improvement

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): What It Means for Educators of Students at Risk

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Despite the American promise of equal educational opportunity for all students, persistent achievement gaps among more and less advantaged groups of students remain, along with the opportunity gaps that create disparate outcomes. (Cook-Harvey, Darling-Hammond, Lam, Mercer, & Roc, 2016, p. v)

The mission of the *National Youth-At-Risk Journal* is to help practitioners—especially educators who serve students placed at risk by poverty and other challenging conditions—to close opportunity gaps that prevent students from attaining a quality education (Rea & Zinskie, 2015). With the journal’s mission in mind, this editorial perspective examines some ways that the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015), which becomes operational in the 2017–2018 school year, may enhance the capacity of educators to help students and schools at risk of underperforming.

Signed into law on December 10, 2015, ESSA is the latest reauthorization of the historical Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed in 1965 as part of United States President Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty.” Consistent with the original purpose of the act, ESSA provides resources and support for students and schools at risk of academic failure because of the inequitable conditions of poverty. Furthermore, ESSA replaces its predecessor, the unpopular federally controlled No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, with a more flexible state controlled educational program.

A basic tenet of ESSA is that educators must believe that all students can succeed (Chenoweth, 2016). In this editorial perspective, we use

the term “at risk” to describe the inequitable conditions, challenging circumstances, or stressful situations that make it more likely for students, individually or collectively, to have poor or harmful school outcomes. We avoid labeling students as “at-risk students” by using the “person-first” language of “students at risk” to describe realistically the problematic conditions that may threaten their safety, health, social-emotional needs, or academic achievement (for more information, see Rea & Zinskie, 2015, pp. 3–6). According to ESSA (2015), students placed at risk for academic failure need special assistance and support to help them succeed in school, and ESSA provides new opportunities for educators to address this student need. We consider some of these new opportunities in this editorial perspective; we also address some of the challenges that educators will face under ESSA in ensuring success for all students.

INCREASES STATES’ FLEXIBILITY AND CONTROL

Under ESSA, states have much greater responsibility for developing and implementing accountability systems designed to support student learning; however, with this increased responsibility also comes more discretion with regard to establishing context-specific academic standards, identifying accountability indicators, designing annual state assessments, and planning interventions for students and schools at risk of low academic performance (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD], 2015; Chenoweth, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; McGuinn, 2016; Patrick, Worthen, Frost, & Gentz, 2016; Weiss

& McGuinn, 2016). For example, ESSA gives school districts—in partnership with school staff and parents—the opportunity to replace the one-size-fits-all remedies of NCLB with locally selected and designed evidence-based interventions that are creatively adapted to the particular needs of their struggling students and schools. With an increase in decision-making authority at the local level, schools will also have a greater responsibility to meet the needs of all students.

BROADENS THE DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

ESSA does include annual testing in reading and math in third through eighth grades and once during high school as one of the four required academic indicators in the state's accountability system because these data are essential for comparing student performance across schools and districts. ESSA also provides an option for high schools to use the SAT or ACT rather than a state-level assessment. However, ESSA broadens the definition of success beyond only performance on standardized assessments (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016); ESSA also requires an additional statewide academic indicator such as student growth at the elementary and middle school levels; a measure of progress in English language proficiency for English language learners (grades 3–8 and once during high school); and high school graduation rate (Chenoweth, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). Patrick et al. (2016) also recommended the use of entry and formative assessments to evaluate student progress.

INCLUDES NON-COGNITIVE INDICATOR

In addition, ESSA requires states to choose at least one non-cognitive indicator such as student engagement, school climate and safety, attendance, postsecondary readiness, or any other that can be categorized as a measure of school quality or student success (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; McGuinn, 2016).

These non-cognitive indicators have important implications for improving the school success of all students, especially students placed at risk by a lack of social-emotional school support, the threat of bullying, or chronic truancy. According to Cook-Harvey et al. (2016), “Carefully chosen measures can help shine a light on poor learning conditions and other inequities” (p. v). Use of multiple measures provides a more holistic view of schools and their students (Elgart, 2016).

There has been disagreement regarding which non-cognitive indicators are most appropriate for the state accountability plans. The non-cognitive (or fifth) indicator must be measured systematically, be related to academic indicators, and provide meaningful differentiation among schools (Schanzenbach, Bauer, & Mumford, 2016). Schanzenbach et al. expressed concern regarding use of a social-emotional indicator like school climate in the accountability system because it is typically assessed via a self-report survey instrument. They noted that an indicator such as attendance is a more valid, reliable, and comparable measure for use in high stakes accountability. They do recommend use of measures of school climate as part of formative assessment.

In contrast, García and Weiss (2016) and West (2016) reported that results of previous empirical research do confirm a link between non-cognitive indicators (e.g., social-emotional skills) and academic and life outcomes. García and Weiss stated that “accountability practices and policies must be broadened to make explicit the expectation that schools and teachers contribute to the development of non-cognitive skills and to make the development of the whole child central to the mission of education policy” (p. 3). It should be noted that while states are allowed to decide the weights for indicators included in their accountability system, academic indicators must be assigned a greater weight than the selected non-cognitive indicator (McGuinn, 2016).

EXPANDS SUBGROUPS FOR DATA REPORTING

As with NCLB, ESSA requires that progress toward meeting or exceeding standards must be assessed for all students including identified subgroups of students who have disabilities, are economically disadvantaged, have limited English language proficiency, and belong to a major racial/ethnic group (ASCD, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). These four subgroups are students that have historically been underserved by schools and are most likely to need special assistance and support; the data for these student subgroups will continue to be disaggregated for data reporting and accountability purposes. Data from three new subgroups, students who are homeless, are in foster care, or have parents in the military, will also be examined but not reported for statewide accountability (ASCD, 2015). Students in these three challenging conditions may also have academic and social-emotional needs that require special attention; however, data have not previously been available on these subgroups to confirm this.

STRESSES EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

ESSA requires that interventions be evidenced-based and defines different types of research evidence allowed when choosing an activity, strategy, or intervention designed for improvement (Lam, Mercer, Podolsky, & Darling-Hammond, 2016). Under ESSA, an activity, strategy, or intervention is defined as evidence-based if it “demonstrates a statistically significant effect on improving student outcomes or other relevant outcomes based on *strong evidence* from an experimental study, *moderate evidence* from a quasi-experimental study, or *promising evidence* from a correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias.” Also considered as evidence-based is an activity, strategy, or intervention that has a “rationale based on high-quality research findings or positive evaluation...that is likely to improve

student or other relevant outcomes and that includes ongoing efforts to examine the effects of such activity, strategy, or intervention” (pp. 290–291). Although considered empirical research, other types of studies (e.g., case studies, descriptive studies, survey research) do not count as sufficient evidence per the ESSA definition; also questions remain whether meta-analyses meet the evidence-based criteria (Epstein et al., 2016).

How do schools determine which interventions or strategies are the most promising? One option is to review previous research literature to determine which have been most effective based on the ESSA definition. [Note: A decision about effectiveness cannot be based on one empirical study; multiple studies showing positive outcomes are needed to make a definitive statement about effectiveness.] Examples of evidence-based interventions that have produced successful outcomes in general include high-quality professional development, class-size reduction, and high school redesign (Lam et al., 2016).

Although ESSA contains numerous references to an “activity, strategy, or intervention”, no definition is provided regarding these actions or materials designed to improve outcomes. Epstein et al. (2016) noted that while interventions that are professionally developed and marketed (e.g., Accelerated Reader, enVisionMATH) are more likely to have a strong research base, ESSA does not limit schools to use of these types of interventions. However, Epstein et al. recommended that when sufficient evidence is available regarding the effectiveness of an intervention, it may be more efficient in terms of time and resources to select an existing, proven option for improving outcomes.

It should be noted that the context of evidence is very important; schools need to focus on evidence from studies in similar settings with similar students (Dynarski, 2015; Sparks, 2016). For example, low-performing schools with a

large population of economically disadvantaged students should seek evidence from research on high-poverty, high-performing schools. In addition to seeing what has worked for others, it is important for schools to test strategies and interventions in their own settings (Chenoweth, 2016). These strategies and interventions must also be evaluated with students in the local setting who are members of one or more of the ESSA designated subgroups.

Practitioner research is a good first step for testing a new activity, strategy, or intervention in the local context. [See Zinskie & Rea, 2016, for guidance on conducting practitioner research.] As Chenoweth (2016) found in her research of high-performing, high-poverty schools, "...the most powerful lever of improvement rests on the ability of one teacher to say to another: 'My kids aren't doing as well as yours. What are you doing?'" (p. 41). The teachers in schools who are consistently reaching and teaching low-performing students are an exemplary source of promising teaching methods that should not be overlooked in the search for evidence-based approaches to school improvement. Principals and teachers in professional learning communities need to find ways to showcase and determine the effects of what is working in their own schools and school districts (ESSA, 2015).

CREATES CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

In the past, data were not being used effectively, and emphasis was placed on compliance and sanctions; however, ESSA is designed to put more focus on improvement, not punishment (Elgart, 2016). With ESSA, schools should not be conducting research or reviewing outcome data just to meet the requirements of a year-end report. Instead, there needs to be a focus on continuous improvement. This requires ongoing examination of evidence at both school and district levels (O'Day & Smith, 2016). Evidence needs to extend beyond intervention outcomes; it is important to look at the process

associated with student learning (Chenoweth, 2016). For example: How do students learn? What is the role of the principal with regard to teaching and learning? What teacher practices are most effective? What worked well? What needs to be improved? It is also important to recognize that change takes time and that failure to improve student outcomes is a "learning opportunity" in the continuous improvement model (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). Finally, making feedback available to all stakeholders at all levels is an important part of the continuous improvement process (Patrick et al., 2016). It is especially important that educators be vigilant regarding continuous improvement for students in the designated subgroups who are at risk of academic failure.

CALLS FOR APPROPRIATE USE AND COMMUNICATION OF DATA

ESSA calls for appropriate use of data obtained as part of the accountability and continuous improvement process; it also requires that individual student privacy be maintained in data reporting. An effective data system must be established that allows data to be reported in an aggregate manner as well as disaggregated by designated subgroups (Patrick et al., 2016). However, this same system must have the capacity for access to individual student data at the school level in order to determine which students require more support. Further, sufficient data points must be stored in a system to monitor student growth over time. States must determine which data are needed and reported at each level and for what purpose (Patrick et al., 2016). For example: What data are needed at state level versus school/district level? What information is of most importance to students and their families?

All stakeholders need to understand the role and goals of the accountability system including implementation method and timeline for students and schools and system plan for recognizing and honoring success (Patrick et

al., 2016). It is also important that the public be kept informed regarding accountability efforts in a transparent manner (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; Elgart, 2016). Weiss and McGuinn (2016) recommended that state educational agencies (SEAs) make an investment in communication, so that two-way dialogue can occur between stakeholders and the public; methods of communication should embrace both the traditional (public forums) and the innovative (social media).

Data dashboards are a common method of providing access to accountability information (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; O'Day & Smith, 2016). Darling-Hammond et al. noted that "Data dashboards using multiple measures can track information about inputs, processes, and outcomes to inform a diagnosis of what is and what is not working in schools and for which students" (p. 4). Cook-Harvey et al. indicated that access to these data can assist schools, districts, and states in identifying and addressing opportunity gaps.

There are issues regarding access to data that might impact subgroups of students and their families, which schools are trying to support. For example: Students and parents who are homeless or economically disadvantaged might not have access to a computer, or parents of students with limited English language proficiency may have difficulty with narrative reporting of data results. Also, some rural schools and households may not have the internet capacity to handle the data-rich environment created by the accountability system.

NECESSITATES EDUCATOR UNDERSTANDING OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Educators are expected to use evidence from high-quality research to inform implementation of activities, strategies, and interventions at the classroom, school, and/or district levels. Evidence also plays a role in instances for

schools identified as low-performing or schools where subgroups are struggling; this requires understanding data in order to create an evidence-based plan for improvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). To realize the promise of ESSA and help students and schools at risk of underperforming, educators will need to become proficient in finding, evaluating, and applying evidence-based research for school improvement.

This process will require that educators have sufficient knowledge and skills to evaluate the quality of research studies as well as appropriateness for implementation of these research findings within their own setting. Educators will need a basic understanding of how to locate quality, peer-reviewed sources, identify flaws in experimental design, assess validity and reliability of measuring instruments, and interpret basic statistical data including effect sizes. Schools and/or districts who develop their own activities, strategies, and interventions must know how to design and conduct an evaluation study in order to determine effectiveness.

Once evidence is obtained, educators also need guidance on how to use this evidence for decision-making, especially with regard to adapting to their local context (Epstein et al., 2016; Sparks, 2016). Dynarski (2015) noted that translating research findings into practice is difficult, particularly if research was conducted on a small-scale. In addition, insufficient information may be provided in a research report regarding an effective intervention making it difficult to replicate in a different setting.

Most schools or school districts do not have designated employees to handle research and evaluation; this is something that has been traditionally been exclusive to larger, well-funded school districts (Dynarski, 2015). Epstein et al. (2016) noted that policymakers should provide technical assistance to states to determine the evidence on activities under consideration.

Other options include bringing individuals from the outside (e.g., higher education faculty, professional consultants) to assist with research and/or to conduct professional development for educators, or selecting individuals from the school and/or district to pursue graduate-level training in applied research, evaluation, and assessment.

All of these initiatives will require funding. With ESSA's focus on new research and evidence-based programs, the U.S. government is investing in this effort. Milner and Holston (2015) reported that "the law authorizes \$300 million in funding for the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grants program by the end of fiscal year 2020" (para. 6). Milner and Holston also noted that new funds have been directed to ESSA to support program evaluation. Educators with requisite knowledge and skills in research, evaluation, and proposal writing will be needed for schools and/or districts to take advantage of this funding.

Editors' Note: To assist our readers, we have listed resources in the Appendix that provide information for educators on how to use evidence, locate research findings on existing interventions, and access funding opportunities.

PREVIEW OF ISSUE CONTENT

Meca Williams-Johnson's interview with Bettina Love focuses on creating spaces that matter for children. Love is well known for her publications and presentations on a range of topics including hip hop education, Black girlhood, queer youth, hip hop feminism, and issues of diversity. In this interview, Love educates readers on how hip hop can influence, engage and motivate kids and how loving each child is foundational to reaching students.

Antonio P. Gutierrez de Blume, Mete Akcaoglu, and Wendy Chambers present their findings from a Photography and Media Literacy Project implemented as an after-school program for fourth and fifth grade students in a rural Title I school in southeast Georgia. Through

the use of technology and other media, the goal of the program was to enhance and develop students' skills in critical thinking, metacognitive planning and monitoring, problem solving, and reasoning.

Dawn Tysinger, Jeffrey Tysinger, and Terry Diamanduros explore K-12 online educators' perceptions of and preparedness for crises (e.g., suspected child/adolescent neglect or abuse, suspected student suicidal ideation) that may impact individual students or the online school environment. Results show that many participants have no training for recognizing the warning signs of the various crisis events in student online content.

Natoya Hill Haskins and colleagues discuss how school counselors can use narrative therapy to support students of color transitioning from an alternative school setting back into a traditional school environment. With narrative therapy, students share their stories and are empowered to create a new narrative that represents who they want to be. The authors include an illustration demonstrating the application of the collaborative narrative therapy process.

Michael Mucedola's literature review highlights disparities for students living in poverty and the impact that poverty has on students' academic performance. Students living in poverty have specific needs that must be accounted for in order to increase performance, retention, and graduation rates at all levels. The author describes community outreach strategies that have the potential to empower impoverished students to improve their learning and academic achievement.

Desiree Vega, Erik Hines, Renae Mayes, and Paul Harris describe the barriers Latino students face in pursuit of educational opportunity and the important role school counselors and school psychologists can play in preparing them for life after high school, whether it be participation in the workforce or attendance at a postsecondary institution. The authors provide policy and practice recommendations for educators.

Rajni Shankar-Brown, an internationally recognized scholar in the areas of poverty and homelessness, diversity and inclusion, and social justice education, is featured in our *Art Corner*. She shares her spoken word poem that depicts her concern and anguish regarding schooling today as well as the small “morsels of light” that inspire hope for her children’s educational future.

CONCLUSION

This is our third issue of the journal, and the journal editors continue to be impressed by the range of topics addressed by our contributors, topics that are at the forefront of education today. All articles in this issue focus on social-emotional and/or academic barriers that impact the education of vulnerable youth, and the authors provide strategies based on evidence for improving students’ academic success. Consistent with ESSA, the *National Youth-At-Risk Journal* seeks to view students and schools in a holistic manner. As states move forward with the development and implementation of their new accountability plans required by ESSA, we encourage educators to use the journal as both a resource and an outlet for evidence-based information that improves practice and supports a quality learning experience for all students.

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Appendix Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Resources for Educators

[Every Student Succeeds Act](#)

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) website includes an overview of ESSA, FAQs about ESSA, and links to ESSA resources, including the full text of ESSA.

[Institute of Education Sciences](#)

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) is the statistics, research, and evaluation arm of the U.S. Department of Education. This site provides scientific evidence, in a useful and accessible format, that can help educators, policymakers and stakeholders improve outcomes for all students.

[National Center for Research in Policy and Practice](#)

This U.S. Department of Education funded center studies how educational leaders use research when making decisions and what can be done to make research findings more useful and relevant for those leaders.

[Office of Innovation and Improvement](#)

This website highlights available grant opportunities, including the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Program. The EIR Program provides funding for evidence-based, field-initiated innovations designed to improve student achievement and attainment for high-need students.

[What Works Clearinghouse](#)

The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) reviews evidence of effectiveness of programs, policies, or practices with the goal of helping schools make evidence-based decisions. Resources available on this website include intervention reports, single study reviews, and practice guides.

U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *Non-regulatory guidance: Using evidence to strengthen education investments*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/guidanceuseinvestment.pdf>

This guidance document is designed to help SEAs, LEAs, schools, educators, partner organizations, and other stakeholders successfully choose and implement interventions that improve outcomes for students.

Social Media: Educators can find and/or share information and dialogue with others using social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Use the hashtag #ESSA to contribute to and follow these discussions.