



Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Primer

This primer provides a brief refresher on the requirements in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the policy levers that provide opportunities for states to advance equity during implementation. It also describes the tools and resources designed to support advocates and policy makers as they work to leverage opportunities to inform and support continuous improvement across all schools as ESSA is implemented. Attached to this primer is an overview of the National Urban League's tools and resources to support affiliates in their efforts to advance equity in education.

National Urban League Engagement in ESSA

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law in December of 2015 and represents the most recent version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), our nation's federal civil rights law in education. This law was designed to ensure a federal guarantee to a quality education regardless of race, income, religion, or zip code.

During the years leading up to the passage of ESSA, the National Urban League was part of a diverse coalition of roughly 46 civil rights and education equity organizations that fought hard to ensure educational and civil rights protections for vulnerable children were prioritized in the reauthorized ESEA.

While ESSA does maintain the civil rights legacy of the federal law by providing tools to advance education equity for historically underserved students, the law rolled back *federal* oversight authority while extending oversight to *states*. This means that states have more flexibility for providing educational opportunities for historically disadvantaged children with less prescription from the federal government. Since history has shown that states have not been good stewards of civil rights, we must remain vigilant in holding them, along with school districts, accountable for upholding the spirit and letter of the law.

Since the bill was signed into law, the National Urban League and several of our partners have worked hard to engage states as critical friends and partners to ensure that equity is present at every level of ESSA implementation.

ESSA Requirements and Equity Levers

Robust accountability systems

ESSA requires that states create a system to hold schools accountable for the progress of all students. As part of their accountability plans, states will set long and short term goals, measure progress towards those goals, identify schools not meeting those goals and create plans to improve school that are not serving all students. Goals have to be set for all students, and broken down by students from major racial/ethnic groups, students with disabilities, English learners, and low-income students. After setting goals, each state must rate schools based on how they perform on the goals they set and the other measures in the school rating system for all students and for each group of students.

Enhanced Data Reporting and Transparency

ESSA requires in-depth reporting of student performance on assessments, graduation rates, and disciplinary rates by all students and individual groups of students. The school's rating must communicate to parents, educators, and the public if a group of students in a school is consistently underperforming, which will trigger that school for targeted support and improvement. It is up to the state to decide what "consistently underperforming" looks like. ESSA requires detailed reporting of resource inequities and opportunities including: funding via per pupil expenditures, access to quality teachers, access to advanced coursework, and



disproportionality in school discipline. Data reported must be understandable, easily accessible, timely, and provided in a variety of languages and formats.

Focus on the Allocation of Resources

ESSA creates an opportunity for states and districts to flood resources, financial and otherwise, into the schools that need them the most. **The law requires that states identify three categories of schools for support and improvement:**

- **Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools:** those in the lowest 5% of Title 1 schools in the state and all high schools with graduation rates below 67%
- **Targeted Support and Improvement Schools:** those that have one or more student group that is “consistently underperforming” as defined by the state
- **Additional Targeted Support and Improvement Schools:** those with one or more groups of students that is performing so low that they would be identified as a Comprehensive Support and Improvement School if they were their own school

The schools identified for improvement must review their current allocation of resources and write a school improvement plan in collaboration with local and community stakeholders, which identifies and addresses resource inequities. Resource inequities can include disparities in district-level funding and budgeting, teacher quality, safe and healthy school facilities, access to advanced courses, and access to technology and the Internet. For the first time, states must report to the US Department of Education and publish on state and district report cards, per-pupil expenditures and access to advanced courses.

Emphasis on Stakeholder Engagement

One of the law’s greatest additions is requiring meaningful consultation with stakeholders including parents, families, and communities in the development of the state plans, Title 1 plans, school improvement plans, report cards and other implementation decisions. This provides opportunities for advocates to do several things:

- Request a school wide or district wide meeting to discuss how report cards are being developed
- Request a meeting to discuss your districts school improvement plan & process
- Ask your district and school how federal, state, and local funds are being distributed. If inequitable, advocate for a weighted student funding system in your school district so that the schools with the most need get additional funds

The continuous engagement of Urban Leagues as stakeholders in education will enable the Urban League movement to influence the strategies being used to ensure all children have a high quality education.

Addition of a School Quality and Student Success Indicator

ESSA requires that school accountability systems include at least one indicator of school quality or student success (SQSS) along with academic achievement, graduation rates, and English language proficiency. Unlike before, states now have the flexibility to use this as an opportunity to select from a wide range of performance indicators that drive education equity including chronic absenteeism, suspension rates, and college and career readiness.



National Urban League ESSA Tools and Resources

Urban League Affiliate Advocacy Support

The National Urban League's [Equity and Excellence Project](#) (EEP), which launched in 2010, explicitly supports local, state, and national advocacy, engagement, and reform/innovation efforts by leveraging our greatest asset, the Urban League Affiliate Movement along with the presidents and chief executive officers who lead it. Through the EEP, we have supported local affiliates in their advocacy efforts around ESSA implementation in a variety of ways.

Since the passage of ESSA, we've provided policy analysis to help affiliates interpret provisions within their state ESSA plan and understand education-related bills or laws developed or implemented in-state. We've also provided advocacy support to our affiliates who have offered testimony to their state departments of education or through state and local convenings by writing talking points, preparing testimony, and drafting press releases regarding various policy and advocacy proposals.

Through our national civil rights and education reform and advocacy partners, we've helped stand up and strengthen diverse coalitions across multiple sectors -- K-12, higher ed, workforce.

No Ceilings on Success Campaign

In January of 2018, the National Urban League partnered with One Solution, the nation's largest Black-owned multi-media company to launch [No Ceilings on Success](#), a national campaign to hold states accountable to their plans for achieving educational equity under ESSA. Derived from the concept of breaking glass ceilings that prevent individuals from reaching their highest potential, No Ceilings on Success builds on the work of the League's Excellence and Equity Project by equipping parents, teachers, students, and communities with the knowledge to remove the barriers that prevent every student from achieving academic excellence.

The No Ceilings on Success (NCOS) campaign and website provides resources, tools, and information through its online portal. For instance, it contains an overview of ESSA, the National Urban League's Statement on Equity in Education, information pertaining to the Equity & Excellence Project, an analysis of the ESSA State Plans, articles and stories highlighting EEP Affiliates, recaps of Urban League convenings, and much more.

Urban League ESSA Equity Report Cards

As part of our Equity & Excellence Project (EEP), the National Urban League reviewed ESSA Consolidated State Plans for 36 states and the District of Columbia where we have Urban League affiliates. These plans provide a preliminary indicator of how states intend to implement the new law and represent a blueprint for state- and district-level decisions that will work to move each state from promise to practice during implementation.

During our analysis, we assessed how well states incorporated equity into their plans and developed a series of report cards that use a green-yellow-red highlight system to rate the plans on 12 Equity Indicators including: early childhood learning, supports for struggling schools, and resource equity. These indicators were selected based on the evidence demonstrating their effectiveness for advancing equity and excellence for vulnerable students in our nation's public schools.

The full report and each state report card can be found on the No Ceilings on Success website at <http://ncos.iamempowered.com/essa-report-card.html>.