

Results in Brief: Implementing Accountability and Supports Under ESEA Flexibility

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The *ESEA* flexibility initiative was designed to give states flexibility with certain provisions of the 2002 reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*, also known as the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*. This report explores the early implementation of state differentiated recognition, accountability and support systems under *ESEA* flexibility. The findings are based on telephone interviews conducted with a sample of state, district, and school-level officials in late 2013 and early 2014, and a review of relevant policy documents that were available on state and local education agency websites during this same time period.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the primary components of state accountability and support systems under *ESEA* flexibility?
 2. What modes of communication did states and districts use to inform and build local-level understanding of state accountability and support systems under *ESEA* flexibility? How did local-level officials perceive state accountability systems under *ESEA* flexibility, including the criteria being used to identify low-performing schools?
 3. What approaches did states take to identify and intervene in low-performing districts and schools? What improvement strategies did principals report implementing?
 4. What supports were states and districts providing to low-performing schools? How did officials perceive their capacity to implement the *ESEA* flexibility provisions for state support and accountability systems, and what challenges did they report?
- Nearly all state officials (11 of 12) reported holding periodic committees, advisory councils, and commissions to share *ESEA* flexibility update to districts.
 - Most district respondents (14 of 22) did not voice concerns about the criteria that their states used to identify low-performing schools.
 - Principals in three of the six states perceived the *ESEA* flexibility accountability criteria as more valid measures of school performance than had been used in previous systems; however, principals in the other three states expressed concerns about their states' criteria.
 - The interviewed principals described improvement strategies that included promoting a culture of targeted data use, standards-aligned instruction, extended time for math and reading instruction, professional development, and positive school climates.
 - State officials reported providing support through regional technical assistance organizations, external support providers, and early warning systems. Ten of the 13 priority and focus school principals described receiving more frequent or more intensive support than in years prior to *ESEA* flexibility.
 - State officials described building capacity through cross-agency collaborations, developing staff expertise, partnering with districts, implementing organizational changes, and consolidating funding streams.

STUDY DESIGN

This report's findings are based on policy and document reviews, and semi-structured telephone interviews with state, district, and school officials conducted in late 2013 and early 2014. The sample included officials from 12 state education agencies (SEAs) with approved *ESEA* flexibility requests, 22 districts located across these 12 states, and 25 Title I schools located across the state and district samples. The sample was not randomly selected and the reported findings are not generalizable to all states, districts, and schools.

Highlights

- Five of the 12 states in the study used a combined subgroup as part of their accountability system and eight of the 12 devised their own goals for measuring student achievement. Eight of the 12 created a designation category for low-performing schools that did not meet the priority and focus designation criteria.

COMPONENTS OF STATE ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS UNDER ESEA FLEXIBILITY

States are required to design accountability systems that expect improvement in student outcomes under *ESEA* flexibility, but states may develop their own annual measurable objectives (AMOs) for achieving those goals. States are required to establish criteria and identify priority, focus, and reward schools using these criteria; and states also may identify other low-performing schools. Priority schools are Title I schools that are among the lowest performing schools in the state, focus schools are Title I schools with the greatest

achievement gaps or in which subgroups are furthest behind, and reward schools are high-performing or improving schools. Under *ESEA* flexibility, states are also expected to support other Title I (and non-Title I) schools that are not making progress or narrowing achievement gaps based on the state's AMOs and are not otherwise identified as priority or focus schools.

Five of the 12 states in the study used a combined subgroup as part of their accountability system.

Among the five states and 12 districts in this study's sample that were using combined subgroups, officials from four states and eight districts did not express concerns that this approach would draw attention away from individual subgroups. However, officials in four of the 12 districts did express some concerns that the needs of some students might be masked through the use of combined subgroups.

Eight of the 12 states created a specific designation category, beyond priority and focus, to monitor and support other low-performing schools.

The officials from these states reported developing this category to monitor and support schools that might not otherwise meet the criteria for priority and focus school designations.

COMMUNICATION, UNDERSTANDING, AND PERCEPTIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY UNDER *ESEA* FLEXIBILITY

State officials reported multiple modes of communication with local education leaders to disseminate information and build understanding of their new accountability systems. Officials from 11 of the 12 states reported that they held periodic committees, advisory councils, and commissions to provide districts with *ESEA* flexibility updates and new information on an ongoing basis. At the same time, officials from two of these states described challenges associated with translating information about the new systems to local stakeholders.

All of the interviewed principals in four of the six states in the school sample reported having a good understanding of their state accountability system; most of the principals in the other two states (7 of 11) expressed concerns about their understanding of the system and the communication they had received from their state.

The majority of district respondents (14 of 22) did not voice concerns about the criteria that their states used to identify low-performing schools. Principals in three of the six states in the sample perceived the criteria as more valid measures of school performance than had been used in previous systems. Principals in the other three states expressed concerns about the accuracy and validity of some of the data their states were using to make accountability designations.

INTERVENTIONS AND IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

Interviewed state and district officials reported that low-performing schools typically were allowed to select their own interventions, but they used established guidance from the state to inform these decisions.

The intervention strategies most frequently described by principals included creating a culture of targeted data use, aligning instruction with standards, extending the learning time in core content areas, providing teachers with professional development, and promoting a more positive school climate.

CAPACITY, SUPPORTS, AND CHALLENGES FOR IMPLEMENTING *ESEA* FLEXIBILITY PROVISIONS

Officials from the 12 states in this study described requiring or offering support to low-performing schools through structures and mechanisms that included regional organizations (three states), external support providers (12 states), and early warning systems (10 states).

All 13 of the priority and focus school principals in the sample described receiving some state-level support for implementing their improvement strategies. Most of these principals (10) also described receiving more intensive or more frequent support from their districts than in the years prior to *ESEA* flexibility.

Principals from 20 of the 25 schools in the sample described a variety of factors that challenged their improvement efforts, including low staff morale (10 principals), limited resources (nine principals), staff turnover (three principals), and testing requirement burdens for English learner students (two principals).

State officials described implementing strategies to build capacity to implement the accountability and support provisions under *ESEA* flexibility, including cross-agency collaborations, developing staff expertise, and partnerships with districts (seven states); structural changes within the SEA (eight states); and efforts to coordinate oversight of federal initiatives and/or multiple funding streams (five states).

A majority of district officials (15 of 22) reported that they have sufficient staff and expertise to support continuous improvement in all priority, focus, and other low-performing schools. However, officials from seven districts reported insufficient staff and expertise to provide the level of support they believed was needed to improve low-performing schools in their districts.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The complete report is available online:
<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/opepd/ppss/reports.html>