



# Protecting School and Student Accountability

## BACKGROUND:

The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA) has directed federal resources to schools for more than four decades to help ensure all children have equal access to a quality education. The most recent reauthorization—or congressional update to the law—occurred with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). Although ESEA was due for reauthorization in 2007, NCLB has governed education policy in states and school districts for more than a decade. While waiting for Congress to complete its next reauthorization, the U.S. Department of Education has offered states flexibility from prescriptive provisions of the law that have become barriers to state and local implementation of innovative education reforms. ESEA flexibility moves away from top-down policies, instead supporting decisions informed by data and expertise at the state and local levels. All participating states must show how their reform plans advance all students' achievement by maintaining a high bar for student success, closing achievement gaps, improving the quality of instruction, and increasing equity by better targeting support and resources to schools based on need.

## DISCUSSION:

All students deserve the same opportunity to learn and thrive no matter where they live. ESEA flexibility enables state and district education officials, principals, and teachers to implement systems of accountability, support, and recognition for their schools that are tailored to local contexts and the unique needs of individual schools. As a part of these systems, states approved for ESEA flexibility must maintain high standards for student performance and commit to eliminating achievement gaps between disadvantaged students and their peers. States also must individualize their education improvement efforts by targeting their lowest-performing schools and schools with the largest achievement gaps for intensive interventions and by acknowledging schools that make progress toward college- and career-ready standards.\* All schools must therefore use subgroup performance data against achievement and graduation rate targets to drive interventions and supports. These locally created accountability systems include more students, better focus support on school and student needs, and require more aggressive action for chronic low performance than measures under NCLB. How states and districts support subgroups of students must be driven by their progress toward meeting assessment performance targets and graduation rates.

Through ESEA flexibility, the Department will both recognize states for demonstrating success—such as creating individualized systems of school accountability and support—and challenge states that fall short of their goals to pursue rigorous reform efforts that focus on what is best for students.

\*See the Definition Box.

## Definition Box:

### \*College- and Career-Ready Standards:

Content standards for kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade that build toward college and career readiness by the time of high school graduation.

\***Title I:** A federally funded program providing financial assistance to local educational agencies and schools with a high percentage of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet state academic standards.

## History in Review:

ESEA, through its successive reauthorizations by Congress, consistently strived to highlight the education inequities between disadvantaged students and their peers. Yet, until its 2001 reauthorization, a public school receiving federal Title I\* funds could overlook disparities in student subgroup performance if that school's overall student population performed well. NCLB exposed dramatic performance disparities by requiring schools to disaggregate—or break out—their student test data by subgroups that include students with disabilities, English Learners, racial and ethnic minorities and underprivileged students. ESEA flexibility requires states to maintain a commitment to report the performance of all student subgroups, taking action in schools that don't measure up, yet also providing rewards for subgroup performance gains.

## STATES IN ACTION:

Examples of strong plans that states have proposed to protect school and student accountability follow.



**Colorado's** flexibility plan focuses on the growth of individual students to ensure they graduate ready to succeed in college or a career. The plan:

- Makes decisions based on the data Colorado receives on district, school, and student growth, as well as achievement, graduation rates, dropout rates, and college readiness. Based on this information, the state will categorize schools by four levels; and
- Provides schools and districts in the lowest categories with the most hands-on assistance from the state in order to create improvement plans and implement the most rigorous interventions, while the highest-category schools and districts will be allowed more autonomy.



**New York's** flexibility plan will focus on the district and school levels.

- Each district will be categorized by both its graduation rate and its ability to meet subgroup performance goals.
- If a district's overall performance has been highly rated, but individual subgroups do not meet their goals, the district nonetheless will receive hands-on assistance from the state.



**Maryland's** plan categorizes each of its schools into one of five performance strands:

- Delineating different levels of support based on the needs and performance features of each strand; and
- Utilizing a performance index based on student growth; graduation rate; dropout rate; and student achievement in reading, mathematics, and science.

## Fast Facts:

- As of the 2012-2013 school year, a total of 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted college- and career-ready standards.
- In the 2010-2011 school year, only 51 percent of schools nationally met their annual performance targets.

**“I fully support the fundamental goal of accountability, but I have never felt comfortable with the one-size-fits-all nature of NCLB. These waivers allow us to better meet the needs of our schools and students while also giving clear information to parents about performance and progress.”**

- North Carolina State Superintendent June Atkinson

*ESEA flexibility granted May 29, 2012*

