

ESSA Pressures States to Assure All Students Have Good Teachers

By Madeline Will

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Every student, no matter their race or family income level, should be taught by an effective teacher, the **Every Student Succeeds Act** declares.

Exactly how to define what makes an effective teacher and how to implement this ambitious goal has been left up to the states—and their track records on getting started have been mixed. In fact, not all states have even publicly reported the data that experts deem necessary to ensure low-income and minority students are not disproportionately being taught by ineffective and inexperienced teachers.

ESSA, which goes into full practical effect this fall, scrapped the "highly qualified teacher" mandates under its predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act, the previous version of the main federal K-12 law. The revised statute also banned the U.S. secretary of education from deciding how states grade their teachers.

Over the past two years, about a half-dozen states **have moved away from the inclusion of student-growth data or other value-added measures** in their teacher-evaluation systems. This shift in policy has reignited a debate between district administrators, union officials, and state politicians about what indicators, including test scores, should be considered **when defining an ineffective teacher**, which the federal law requires states do.

At the same time, states must also describe in their ESSA plans how they will make sure that poor and minority students aren't being taught by a disproportionate number of those ineffective or inexperienced teachers.

"We think this provision is among the most important in the law itself," said Elizabeth Ross, the managing director of state policy for the National Council on Teacher Quality, a Washington-based research and advocacy group. "We know that great teaching matters—great teaching matters the most for students who are most behind."

But across the board, states have paid little attention to that provision in the ESSA plans they submitted to the federal government last year, she said. An NCTQ analysis **found that more than half of the states** failed to publicly report all required data on educator-equity gaps in their initially submitted plans. Only seven states, including New Jersey and New Mexico, had specified a timeline to eliminate the identified gaps.

Instead, many states included lofty goals in their ESSA plans that could take a decade or more to be realized, such as improving teacher preparation, said Andy Baxter, the vice president of educator effectiveness for the Southern Regional Education Board, an Atlanta-based nonprofit.

"What worries me about this approach is that in the meantime, until you get to that point, the students who are low-income, the students of color, are bearing the burden of poor instruction," he said. "The promising approaches are taking the long view and also looking at short-term ways to correct some of the inequities."

U.S. Secretary of Education **Betsy DeVos** has approved 37 state plans so far, along with those of the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Last month, speaking generally, she **scolded state chiefs** for pushing forward plans that "only meet the bare minimum required by the law."

And ensuring all students have equitable access to qualified teachers was already written into law in 2002, under No Child Left Behind, and in 2009, under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, said Liz King, the senior policy analyst and director of education policy of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, a lobbying group based in Washington.

"States have no excuse not to address this problem," she said.

Digging Into the Data

The first step for state department officials should be to compile and analyze data to understand where ineffective and inexperienced teachers are clustered and how students are being shortchanged, Baxter said.

For example, Massachusetts has compiled a student learning experience report to analyze district-level data about the quality of instruction students are receiving. The report will shed light on problems that are often hiding in plain sight, Baxter said—like when a student has been assigned to an ineffective teacher two years in a row. (Massachusetts does not explicitly define what an ineffective teacher is in its ESSA plan, but its evaluation system ranks teachers as "exemplary," "proficient," "needs improvement," and "unsatisfactory." The data the state collects looks at the rates at which certain groups of students are taught by teachers who receive a "needs improvement" or "unsatisfactory" rating.)

Massachusetts is in its first year of making this report available to districts across the state, a state education department spokeswoman said.

School and district leaders need to be aware of that granular data, Baxter said, so they can make sure the student has an effective teacher the following year. "That's a much more immediate fix than waiting 20 years for teacher preparation to be revamped," he said.

Although ESSA doesn't specify the level of data disaggregation at which states must calculate and report educator-equity gaps, NCTQ recommends reporting data at the student level, as Tennessee and South Carolina are doing.

And while the federal law requires states to determine educator-equity gaps for low-income and minority students, other states are going beyond that requirement. States such as Kentucky and New York calculate and report additional data on student subgroups, such as English-language learners and students with disabilities. Pennsylvania, meanwhile, also calculates turnover rates of educators, teacher pay, and state funding of districts to get the bigger picture of educator-equity gaps.

Although ESSA doesn't require states to use objective measures of student growth when defining educator effectiveness, Ross, of the NCTQ, said she hopes states will still consider collecting that information to look for systemic patterns of inequity.

Making the Findings 'Meaningful'

In New Mexico, officials said the data from its evaluation system is instrumental in meeting the state's three-year goal, outlined in its ESSA plan, to eliminate educator-equity gaps.

"The foundational underpinning of all this work is actually knowing who your exemplary teachers are ... who your minimally effective teachers are," said Matthew Montañó, the state's deputy secretary of teaching and learning.

The evaluation system, **which researchers have called the toughest in the country**, is based on student-growth data, along with teacher absences, classroom observations, and other measures. About a quarter of New Mexico's 22,400 teachers were labeled as "minimally effective" or "ineffective" in 2017.

Many teachers of all rating levels have said the system is unfair. Last year, in response to some of those criticisms, the education department **scaled back the student-growth component** from 50 percent to 35 percent of a teacher's overall rating, in addition to other tweaks.

Department officials said knowing teachers' performance reviews not only helps districts weed out the failing teachers, but it also helps them retain high-performers.

Teachers with an "exemplary" rating are achieving about 24 months of student progress in a single year, said Christopher Ruzkowski, the New Mexico education secretary. Only 4.5 percent of teachers are labeled exemplary, and the state legislature just approved a merit pay plan to reward those teachers with bonuses of up to \$10,000.

"To retain all of our exemplary teachers through professional development, compensation, and teacher leadership opportunities is a moral imperative," Ruzkowski said.

In Arkansas, efforts to assure equitable levels of teacher quality include piloting the Opportunity Culture model in certain Title I schools. That initiative, led by Public Impact, an education policy and management-consulting firm in Chapel Hill, N.C., **seeks to give more students access to high-quality instruction** through putting highly effective teachers in charge of a teaching team and giving them coaching responsibilities.

Ensuring Local Context

Arkansas did not include a timeline to eliminate educator-equity gaps in its state plan, because the state wanted to maintain local autonomy, officials there said.

"We didn't want a cookie-cutter system where we hold all the districts to the same target dates, because we understand all the districts have different needs," said Jeremy Owoh, the assistant commissioner of educator effectiveness and licensure in Arkansas.

To that end, the state education department has started hosting day-long "equity lab" workshops for school districts that have substantial educator-equity gaps, though the support is available for all districts in the state. The department is conducting three equity labs this spring.

Department officials will show district administrators all the district's data—the district's percentages of ineffective, inexperienced, and out-of-field teachers, as well as student achievement and growth data and teacher attrition numbers. District officials will be able to see which of their schools have the largest equity gaps: Are their high-poverty, high-minority schools being served by the least-experienced or least-effective teachers?

Then, district leaders will pick one of their equity issues to analyze for what's causing the problem and how they can fix it, said Cheryl Reinhart, the director of educator licensure for the state.

Department officials will share possible strategies and research that the district can use in their next steps.

"It's not just a one-and-done workday, it's the beginning of a process," Reinhart said.

King, of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, said states need to make this work part of a holistic approach to equity.

"We see disparities in funding, we see disparities in salaries, we see disparities in [access to resources]," she said. "No one should be surprised that we see disparities in access to [effective] teachers."