

## ESSA Reins In, Reshapes Federal Role in Literacy

By [Liana Heitin](#)

The literacy provisions in the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) illustrate just how differently the federal government sees its role in reading instruction than it did 14 years ago.

While the [No Child Left Behind Act authorized Reading First](#), a \$1 billion early-elementary grant program with very prescriptive guidelines, the new law creates a program that will have less than one-fifth the funding, is for students of all ages, and leaves instructional decisionmaking up to the locals.

"This is a significant change in the flow of resources," said Richard Long, a co-chairman of Advocates for Literacy, a coalition of about 70 education groups.

ESSA authorizes a new program called Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation, or LEARN, aimed at improving achievement in reading and writing. LEARN authorizes the secretary of education to give grants to states for evidence-based literacy instruction in high-need schools. The U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences will conduct a national evaluation of those programs, though the details on what "evidence-based" means and how the programs will be evaluated remain unclear.

The grant funding applies to students from birth through grade 12. States and districts must allocate no less than 15 percent of those funds for children ages zero to 5, no less than 40 percent of funds for students in K-5, and no less than 40 percent for students in grades 6-12.

LEARN essentially replaces [Striving Readers, which awarded literacy grants](#) to six states per year. That program wasn't authorized by NCLB, but Congress appropriated \$190 million for it in the 2016 budget. LEARN is expected to get about the same amount of funding, but there's some thought it will be doled out across more states.

Emily Kirkpatrick, the executive director of the National Council of Teachers of English, said the funding pot for LEARN is a "potential disappointment."

"At least it's in there, but what can we do that continues a very effective program and yet doesn't spread the dollars so thin that you lose the effectiveness?" she asked.

The new law also gives states flexibility in how they use the funds. Some say that will allow states to be more deliberate about the student populations they target. Others worry it will lead to inequities in the quality of implementation.

Notably, the bill does not reauthorize Reading First. In 2008, that program, aimed at early readers, was found to have [boosted time spent teaching fundamentals like phonics](#), but not to have improved overall literacy. Congress defunded it amid allegations of impropriety in how state grants were awarded.

### Libraries Get a Boost

The new law also provides protections for school libraries, which advocates say the No Child Left Behind Act did not do.

Budgets for school libraries were cut significantly in many places during the Great Recession, partly because states and districts had so many other federal requirements to fulfill.

The new legislation authorizes the **Innovative Approaches to Literacy program**, which was not in the old law but funded through appropriations. The new law allows the education secretary to award grants for literacy programs in low-income areas, including enhancing school libraries. It also allows states and districts to use Title II teacher-quality funds for instructional services provided by school libraries. And the law encourages local education agencies to assist schools in developing library programs to boost students' digital skills.