

States, Districts to Call Shots on Turnarounds Under ESSA

By Daarel Burnette II

The federal government will still require states to identify their worst-performing schools under the **newly signed Every Student Succeeds Act**.

But exactly how to turn those schools around will largely be left up to district and state officials, unlike the more prescriptive requirements under the version of the federal K-12 education statute the new law replaces.

Because the turnaround language in ESSA is so loose and shifts significant responsibility to state officials, it remains to be seen exactly how chronically underperforming schools will be treated in the coming years.

The most visible changes will come with how states identify their worst-performing schools, when they intervene and who will be in charge of those interventions, and how they scrutinize and pay for those efforts.

States also will be allowed to direct a slightly higher portion of their federal Title I aid to turnaround efforts. And in identifying low-performing schools, states will have to include at least one nonacademic indicator, such as student engagement or school climate and safety.

Critics say who's in charge of intervention efforts matters greatly. They also warn that ill-defined indicators of school quality **could lead to classroom manipulation**, and that states may end up not scrutinizing the quality of the intervention measures.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, which ESSA replaces, billions of local, state, and federal dollars were poured into prescribed turnaround efforts through **the School Improvement Grant program**, with mixed results. Hurdles include **racial segregation, hyper-concentrated poverty, high rates of student mobility**, and the Council of the Great City Schools, a group representing large urban districts, whose schools have been the focus of turnaround efforts in recent years.

Identifying Schools

Under ESSA, which goes into full effect in fall 2017, states must identify schools that perform among the bottom 5 percent on their accountability systems and where fewer than 67 percent of the students graduate from high school. They have to make those designations, based on both academic and nonacademic factors, at least every three years.

States also have to identify schools where students in racial, language, disability, and other subgroups perform at the level of students in the state's worst-performing schools. Intervention efforts will remain focused at the local level, though, unless those subgroups fail to improve after several years.

District administrators who oversee a state's worst-performing schools will have to design their own **"evidence based"** plans to turn those schools around. Each state will have the final say over what qualifies as solid evidence, under a new framework that provides greater flexibility than the **"scientifically based"** research definition under the NCLB law.

That change concerns some observers, who argue that the state of education research is weak, and that what qualifies as evidence is too loosely defined in the new law.

If a school fails to improve for a number of years (no more than four), the state has to step in with its own plan.

In the past, **states have run schools or entire districts directly, fired everybody at a school**, or taken control of the school and **handed it over to a charter operator**. Some states will likely continue intervening the way they have under NCLB waivers they received from the U.S. Department of Education, but other states could ease—or strengthen—those intervention programs.

Funding Flexibility

Districts also will get extra money under the new law to turn schools around.

In the past, just 4 percent of Title I money for disadvantaged students was reserved for turnarounds. That money, more than \$7 billion spent by states and districts since 2007, was handed out in the form of federal School Improvement Grants, which came with restrictions on how states used the aid. States could fire an entire staff, close the school, or entrust it to a charter operator. Such efforts have had mixed results.

Under the new law, the SIG program is gone, along with its stringent requirements. Instead, 7 percent of states' Title I money can be designated for turnarounds. At least 95 percent of that set-aside money must be funneled to school districts' turnaround efforts.

That concerns Andy Smarick, a policy fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and an advocate for charter schools.

"The way we solve this problem is not by funneling more money [to districts] so they can continue to fail," Smarick said.

But Chris Minnich, the executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, said states will retain their authority to oversee turnaround models.

"The right role for states is still up for debate," Minnich said. "We all own this."

In Memphis, Tenn., the state moved in 2012 to begin to take over several chronically underperforming schools by either directly running them or handing them over to charter school operators.

But a **recent study shows** that the district's own turnaround efforts, largely funded by SIG, district, and philanthropic money, have resulted in academic gains that outpace the state's.

"As we continue to compete for limited resources, we want the state to put its resources behind a model we know that works," said Kevin Woods, a school board member in Shelby County, which includes the Memphis schools.