

Making ESSA Work for Rural Students, Schools, and Communities

A Brief Guide for Educators and Policymakers

Battelle *for Kids*

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What projects have you started or begun with others that might be expanded or enriched by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)? What might assist you with where you are going?

Just before I graduated from a small, rural Appalachian high school in Ohio, our counselor took me and another boy to visit his alma mater, The Ohio State University.

He described the place as *“large, messy, and full of opportunity.”* He could have been talking about ESSA, the sweeping new federal education law. It turns out my counselor was right, and in that large, messy place, I was introduced to subjects I’d never heard of, sports I’d never played, and doctors who didn’t practice medicine! But in all that mess, I received enormous opportunities if I pursued them. I did, and my personal and professional life was enriched forever.

This is how we should think about ESSA. Consider this guide as an introduction to the big pieces you may wish to explore. This is not simply about complying with federal or state law; rather it’s about seeing the opportunities in it to help you move education forward for students. It will require probing, asking, clarifying, and ultimately deciding, but do it with your eyes open for the benefits to rural students. My experience is that you often see and get what you look for when you face a change. We hope this guide helps you on your journey to advance educational opportunity and economic prosperity.

Jim Mahoney

Executive Director, Battelle for Kids



MAKING SENSE OF ESSA



In December 2015, Congress passed and President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a comprehensive rewrite of the five-decade-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The newly revised federal law replaces the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and gives states and school districts greater flexibility to shape policies around accountability, school turnarounds, academic standards and student tests, teacher evaluations, and more.

The law ushers in a new era of local innovation in education that offers substantial possibilities for helping rural schools and communities. With the goal to provide all children with an opportunity to “*receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps,*” ESSA requires states to develop and submit plans to the U.S. Secretary of Education that include all of the following:

STANDARDS

States must adopt “challenging academic standards” in math, reading or language arts, and science.

What resources and support do rural schools need to implement academic standards that connect to work and life-readiness skills?

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ACCOUNTABILITY

States are required to develop accountability plans, but are given discretion in what to hold schools accountable for and how to intervene.

How can state accountability systems better fit the rural context?

ASSESSMENTS

States still must test students in reading, math, and science, but have more flexibility in how students may be tested.

What is the capability of rural schools to offer online testing and other assessment options?

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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

States must identify and intervene in low-performing schools, but can develop their own evidence-based strategies.

What strategies have been successful in turning around rural schools?

As more control over K–12 education shifts to states and local school districts under ESSA, rural schools, education organizations, businesses, and policymakers will need to work together to ensure the new law is implemented fairly—and in ways that will help more students in rural areas.

FOCUSING ON RURAL OPPORTUNITIES



ESSA offers new opportunities and resources to support rural education. Here are five key ways that rural schools can take advantage of the new law:

1. RESOURCE FLEXIBILITY



ESSA preserves the **Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP)**, which provides resources to eligible rural school districts to recruit, develop, and retain teachers, provide new technology, boost parent engagement, and close achievement gaps. Learn more about REAP, check your district's eligibility, and apply for funds at www2.ed.gov/nclb/freedom/local/reap.html.

The law also gives rural districts the flexibility to focus federal dollars on programs and activities to address their unique needs. It allows for 100-percent transferability of funds between Title II (teacher recruitment, retention, and professional learning) and Title IV (student health and safety) and from Titles II and IV into Title I (assistance for low-income students and schools). Districts can submit a **Rural Consolidated Plan** to the state to access funds for various programs, with the goal of reducing the administrative burden on districts and bringing additional dollars to rural areas.

2. EDUCATOR EQUITY



Through the Title II portion of the law, ESSA seeks to provide greater access to effective teachers and leaders. Rural schools can use Title II dollars to recruit and retain educators, offer leadership and other career advancement opportunities for staff, and invest in high-quality professional development to improve teaching and student learning. Learn more about Title II in your state, including who to contact, at title2.ed.gov/Public/Home.aspx.

The law also creates the **Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program** (formerly the Teacher Incentive Fund, or TIF), which awards competitive grants to school districts to support the development or expansion of performance-based compensation systems or human capital management systems. ESSA ensures equitable distribution of these grants between urban and rural areas. More details about the program will emerge in the coming months, but the Ohio TIF consortium offers a glimpse of how rural districts can leverage these funds to improve teaching and learning. Learn more at www.BFK.org/OhioTIF.

In addition, ESSA creates a **STEM Master Teacher Corps program** that provides funds to states to attract and retain effective science, technology, engineering, and math teachers, especially in high-poverty rural schools.

3. CAPACITY TO INNOVATE



ESSA creates the **Education Innovation and Research program** to support *“entrepreneurial, evidence-based, field-initiated innovations to improve student achievement and educational attainment for high-need students.”* The law requires that not less than 25 percent of grants be awarded to projects that impact rural school districts or a consortium of rural districts. Given the limited capacity of many small and rural districts to pursue competitive grants, collaborative action is critical to apply for funds and advance local innovation.

ESSA also creates a new **Student Support and Academic Enrichment block grant**, which authorizes \$1.6 billion annually for formula grants, focused on providing all students with access to a well-rounded education. School districts can submit an application to the state for funds to support a number of efforts to improve student achievement, including expanding access to high-quality digital learning experiences, digital resources, and access to online courses taught by effective educators.

4. SUPPORT FOR PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES



ESSA will provide grants to support the operation of **full-service community schools** in high-poverty rural districts, with the goal of improving opportunities for children in the nation's most distressed communities. Using public schools as hubs, community schools bring together many partners to offer a range of supports to children and families, including academics, health and social services, and community development activities. Learn more at [communityschools.org](https://www.communityschools.org).

ESSA also directs resources to create **Promise Neighborhoods**, providing a comprehensive, effective continuum of coordinated services in neighborhoods—and rural areas, which can stretch across multiple school districts, counties, or an entire region—with high concentrations of poverty. ESSA requires that no less than 15 percent of these funds be directed to implement Promise Neighborhoods in rural areas. Learn more at [ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods](https://www.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods).

In addition, ESSA establishes **Preschool Development Grants** to help states improve coordination, quality, and access to early-childhood education for low-income and disadvantaged students. The program will also work to maximize parental choice among a mixed delivery system of early-childhood education program providers.

5. HELP FOR STRUGGLING SCHOOLS



ESSA does away with the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. Instead, every state department of education will be required to identify two primary categories of schools for support and improvement. **Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools** are the lowest-performing five percent of Title I schools as well as high schools with graduation rates below 67 percent. **Targeted Support and Improvement Schools** include those that have one or more persistently underperforming student subgroups. There are no longer any federally authorized school-improvement models; however, interventions must be evidence-based, or based on reliable research (in fact, many of the grant programs described in this report will require evidence-based programs and strategies). Each state education agency is required to reserve seven percent of its Title I funds for school-improvement grants. Ninety-five percent of the funds must be distributed either competitively or by formula to local school districts.

The former SIG program did not work well for many eligible rural schools. ESSA allows states more flexibility to support school turnaround models and approaches that are more responsive to the unique circumstances many rural districts face.

States are required to invest in new and different ways to help rural schools, such as:

1. Incentivizing rural school-improvement networks that will enable districts to work with providers that have a proven record of helping rural schools, strengthening the rural educator talent pool, and bolstering parent and community engagement.
2. Creating school-improvement innovation funds, whereby rural schools individually or collaboratively can secure resources to develop evidence-based strategies for advancing place-based and learner-centered education.

SHAPING THE PATH FORWARD

Many states have begun collecting feedback from stakeholders to inform their ESSA plans, but there is still time for rural educators to get involved. Your input is critical to ensure optimal benefit for rural students, teachers, school leaders, parents, and communities. Here are three ways you can help to elevate the rural voice in ESSA planning and implementation:

1. ENGAGE DIRECTLY IN THE STATE ESSA PLANNING PROCESS



State departments of education are hosting focus groups, listening tours, webinars, and other events to share information about ESSA and capture input from stakeholders to inform state plans. In addition, many states invite interested parties to submit questions and comments about ESSA online. There may also be an opportunity for rural educators to join workgroups charged with helping draft state plans and sharing feedback once the draft plan is complete. Visit your state department of education's website to discover how your state is engaging stakeholders in the process. Your ability to advise state legislators or your governor is important, because the law requires states to seek meaningful guidance from these officials. Make your voice heard.

2. CONNECT WITH STATE AND NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS



Which education organizations in your state represent the interests of rural students, districts, and educators? Can you work through state organizations for rural economic development, school leaders, teachers, school boards, and others? Leverage the networks and influence of these organizations around a vision for rural success, and work together to ensure the interests of rural districts and students are considered in ESSA planning and implementation. Get more educators and advocates involved from a variety of different communities and perspectives.

3. RALLY PARENTS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS



Engage local business people, civic leaders, parents, and other stakeholders in the community to join the conversation about ESSA, making the case that a strong rural voice in implementing the new law is critical to support equity and educational opportunities for students, and improve economic prosperity in rural areas.

Rural leaders also have an opportunity to influence federal policy in rural education. ESSA requires the U.S. Department of Education to conduct a study on how it can more effectively address the unique needs of rural schools and to identify actions to *“meaningfully increase the consideration and participation of rural schools”* in the development of processes and regulations. If you are interested in sharing your ideas, e-mail the Department at rural@ed.gov. Connect with Battelle for Kids, the [National Rural Education Association](#), the [School Superintendents Association \(AASA\)](#), and the [Rural School and Community Trust](#) for information and guidance.

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF ESSA



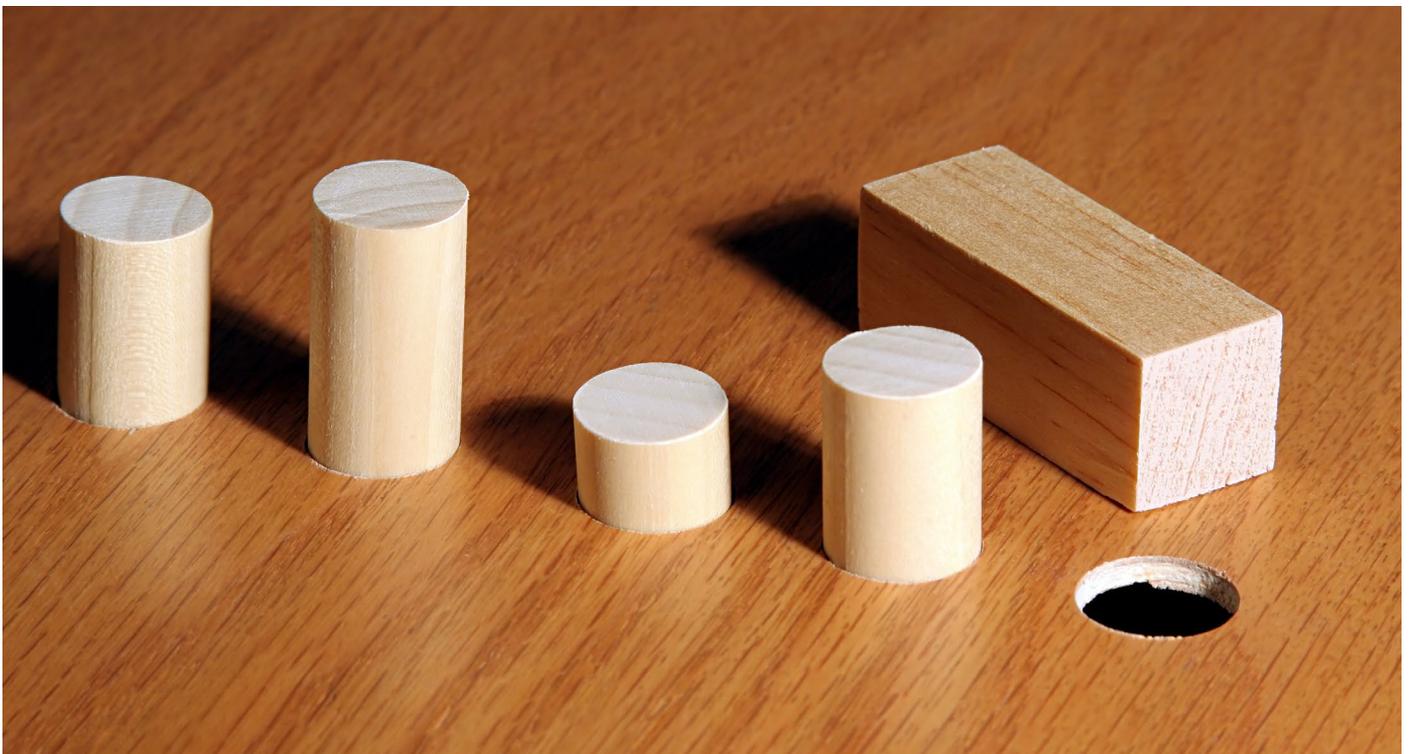
Making ESSA work for rural students, schools, and communities is a complex challenge and will require a great deal of collaboration. Rural districts can:

1. Move beyond a compliance mindset and focus on their own educational vision and goals. Target and align available resources under Title I, Title II, Title IV, and REAP to best serve your local needs.
2. Collaborate with other rural districts and connect with school improvement, community, and business partners to increase your chances of securing competitive grants and decrease bureaucratic burdens.
3. Advocate for an increase in state support of targeted technical assistance to successfully implement evidence-based, school-improvement strategies.

HOW BATTELLE FOR KIDS CAN HELP

Battelle for Kids has a proven record of engaging with rural school districts as a thought leader and implementation partner to develop innovative practices and efficiently scale their use to advance educational equity and opportunity for all students. We help rural schools and districts work through a “square peg” mentality to best leverage federal and state policy for local success. ESSA and the reauthorization of the **Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act** (the federal law covering career and technical education) provide a great opportunity to level the playing field for rural students and help revitalize rural America.

If we can help make ESSA work for you, please contact us at info@bfk.org to get started.



BattelleforKids.org

We're passionate about collaborating with educators and sharing lessons learned to move education forward. Visit our Learning Hub to find blogs, publications, success stories, videos, and other free resources to support your work.

