

Every Student Succeeds Act – Minnesota State Plan Recommendations from the Accountability Committees

For the first phase of recommendations for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Minnesota State Plan, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) convened an **advisory committee**, which included a wide range of organizations and perspectives to weigh in on concepts and values, as well as a smaller **technical committee** to inform the necessary mathematical analysis and the technical aspects of the calculations. These recommendations reflect the current thinking of the majority of members in the relevant committees. In most cases, some members dissent from their committee's recommendation. A list of invited members can be found under ["Accountability Committees"](#) in the "ESSA Committees" section of MDE's ESSA web page.

I. Broad Themes

Recognizing that Minnesota has significant gaps in student outcomes, both committees support:

- **Accurately identifying schools for improvement** to increase educational excellence and equity.
- **Accurately identifying schools for positive recognition** to celebrate success, help others learn, and encourage all schools to engage in continuous improvement work.
- Helping the state **effectively prioritize resources** to improve schools where students of color, students from low-income families, English Learners (ELs), and students with disabilities are struggling the most.
- Helping communities and schools **understand and address the conditions and actions that affect student outcomes**.
- Helping the public **understand the state of their schools**.
- Exploring how best to **use other sources of data** that might not meet all technical requirements for the federal school identification system but that could help the public better understand how schools are doing and how they could improve.
- Aligning the federal system under ESSA with the state-level **World's Best Workforce** goals, process, and framework.

Many committee members expressed dissatisfaction with the current system. A **desire for bold thinking**, as well as **frustration with limitations** imposed by both federal and state laws and regulations, ran through both committees.

II. Uses of the Federal School Identification System

Decision Point: *ESSA requires that the state use a system to identify schools for improvement. ESSA has no requirements about whether or how to identify schools for positive recognition.*

Recommendation: The advisory committee recommended that **the identification system apply to all schools** (currently, all schools receive a calculation, but only those in the federal Title I program can be

identified for improvement). While ESSA does not require one, the advisory committee also recommended developing a **similar system for districts**.

The advisory committee recommended that **positive recognition** for schools:

- **Use a wider range of data** than is in the federal school identification system.
- Provide a **clearer focus on schools where key student groups are succeeding**.
- Help communities, teachers, and local leaders **find schools to learn from**.

III. Indicators in the Federal School Identification System

ESSA requires that Minnesota's system for identifying schools for improvement must contain the following indicators for **elementary and middle schools**:

- *Academic Achievement*, as measured by proficiency on state math and reading tests.
- *Academic Progress*, as measured by growth on state math and reading tests.
- *Progress toward English Language Proficiency*, as measured by English Learners' (EL) progress on a test of English language development separate from the state reading test.
- *School Quality or Student Success*, as measured by one or more measurements of other school characteristics such as school climate, family engagement, etc.

For **high schools**, Academic Progress is replaced by **Graduation Rate**, as measured by at least the four-year rate, with the option of including longer rates as well.

Academic Achievement

Decision Point: *ESSA requires the use of math and reading state tests in the accountability system and gives states the option to include science.*

Recommendation: The advisory committee recommended this measurement use **math and reading state tests only**, and that it not include the state science test. Members were concerned that including the science test would narrow the focus of science classes, reducing hands-on and inquiry-based learning. Some members also felt that state tests play too great a role in schools. Committee members who disagreed often cited the importance of science as a discipline as well as the opportunities of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) jobs.

Decision Point: *ESSA requires that the calculation of academic achievement be based on grade-level proficiency on state tests. States can calculate academic achievement using simple proficiency rates or some other calculation based on proficiency.*

Recommendation: The technical committee recommended using a **proficiency index** that gives schools partial credit for students who partially meet standards and full credit for students who are meet or exceed standards.

Academic Progress

Decision Point: ESSA requires that the measurement of academic progress apply to elementary and middle schools. It gives states the option to use a measure of growth for high schools as well.

Recommendation: The advisory committee recommended that this **only be used for elementary and middle schools**.

Decision Point: ESSA requires that the measurement of academic progress be based on some measurement of growth on state tests or a similar academic measurement. It does not specify the model to be used when calculating growth.

Recommendation: After much discussion, most members of the technical committee recommended that Minnesota continue to base this measurement on a calculation of progress called **growth z-scores**, although they recommended Minnesota change the way this calculation is reported so that it is easier for schools and the public to understand. Growth z-scores show how well a student scored on their current grade's test relative to expectations based on how they scored on the previous year's test and how students with similar scores have historically performed. The members who recommended this approach felt it did the best job of capturing all students' growth, and not just those students who cross particular boundaries between achievement levels.

A major criticism from those members who disagreed was that this approach does not reflect the state's standards and only measures student progress compared to other students.

Many members on both sides of the question expressed an interest in finding a way to create a **vertical scale** across grades that would **open up other options for measuring growth**.

Graduation Rate

Decision Point: ESSA gives the states two options for how the calculation of graduation rate counts students who drop out after less than half an academic year at a school. They can either count at the school they attended the longest or the school they attended most recently.

Recommendation: The advisory committee recommended that such students count in the graduation rate of **the high school they attended the longest**. Many argued that a student's dropping out is most fairly attributed to the school where they spent the largest share of their high school career.

(Students who drop out after *more* than half an academic year would still be counted at the school they dropped out of, whether or not that was the school they'd attended the longest.)

Decision Point: ESSA requires that the graduation rate indicator include four-year graduation rates. It gives the states the option to include extended-year graduation rates up to the seven-year rate.

Recommendation: The technical committee recommended using a **combination of four-year and seven-year rates** when calculating the graduation rate indicator, to ensure that all students – including those on individual plans that recommend education through age 21 due to particular disabilities – are included.

Progress toward English Language Proficiency

Decision Point: ESSA requires that the indicator of progress toward English language proficiency reflect the English language development of English Learners.

Recommendation: The technical committee recommended using **an improvement index** for English Learners that reflects how on track they are to achieving proficiency in English. Each student's targets would be based on their English proficiency level when they were first identified as an English Learner, as well as on whether they are a student with limited or interrupted formal education.

School Quality or Student Success

Decision Point: ESSA requires that the system include at least one indicator of school quality or student success that can be based on data other than test scores or graduation rates. Any measurement used must provide annual statewide data that allows for comparisons between schools and can be disaggregated by student group.

Recommendation: The advisory committee identified several areas of interest for the potential indicator(s) of school quality or student success. Some of the most broadly supported areas were work and postsecondary readiness, access to student support services, school climate, student engagement, and social-emotional learning.

A subcommittee investigated available options for each of these areas. Most currently available data sources did not meet federal technical requirements. The subcommittee brought two potential measurements to the whole advisory committee for consideration: **chronic absenteeism/high attendance** and **participation in high school programs for work and postsecondary readiness**. In both cases, and especially for high school program participation, members of the subcommittee and of both full committees expressed questions and concerns about using these measurements. More work will be done to explore what is possible for this indicator.

Weighting

Decision Point: ESSA requires that each of the indicators based on test scores or graduation rates have "substantial weight" in the system for identifying schools for improvement, and that those indicators combined must have "much greater weight" than the indicator(s) of school quality or student success.

Recommendation: In general, members of **the advisory committee recommended placing slightly more weight on Academic Progress than on Academic Achievement** in the final calculation for elementary and schools. Members of the **technical committee generally favored a more even split**.

The advisory committee generally favored placing **15 to 20 percent of the weight on the indicator(s) of school quality or student success**. However, **this might be too high to meet federal regulations' requirements** for making sure that the other indicators carry "significantly more weight" than the indicator(s) of school quality or student success.

IV. Summary

While ESSA has often been talked about as an opportunity for significant innovation, **the law still requires that significant weight be placed on test-based calculations and graduation rates** in the school identification system. Those requirements, as well as the various restrictions and technical rules in both the law and the regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Education, mean that **many parts of the system used by the state will most likely resemble a revised version of the current system** rather than a wholesale departure. This is a source of frustration and disappointment.

However, the **opportunities offered by the indicator(s) of school quality or student success** (especially as more data systems are developed and used), as well as the advisory committee's recommendations to **rethink and broaden positive recognition of schools**, to make **all schools eligible for identification for improvement**, and to develop a **district-level calculation** would all represent significant changes to Minnesota's current approach to school accountability.