**Pennsylvania’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Consolidated State Plan**

**Answers to Frequently Asked Questions**

**Introduction**

On December 10, 2015, President Barack Obama enacted the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA).

On September 18, 2017, to fulfill the law’s requirements, Pennsylvania submitted its [ESSA Consolidated State Plan](#) to the U.S. Department of Education for review and approval.

The submitted State Plan represented the culmination of more than 18 months’ work, and was informed from start to finish by meaningful stakeholder engagement and feedback.

Over the course of all four phases of stakeholder engagement, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) received questions and comments regarding a number of issues related to ESSA, as well as broader questions regarding education policy in the commonwealth. For more information regarding trends in public comment received during the 30-day formal public comment period required by federal law, please see a summary report prepared by the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center (MACC) at WestEd.

This document was developed to address questions that were raised during the 30-day formal public comment period. While not all of the input Pennsylvania received is required to be included in the State Plan submitted to the U.S. Department of Education, PDE took into consideration each comment and is committed to using the feedback received prior to submission to inform Pennsylvania’s implementation of ESSA.

If you are interested in commenting on Pennsylvania’s submitted ESSA State Plan, or if you have further questions that are not addressed in this document, please email RA-edESSA@pa.gov.
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A. General Questions

A-1. What resources will be needed and provided to fully implement the strategies and programs outlined in Pennsylvania’s ESSA Consolidated State Plan?

A significant number of commenters asked whether Pennsylvania would have the resources necessary to deliver on State Plan commitments. For the last several months, Pennsylvania has been a national leader in raising concerns about proposed reductions in federal aid for core programs, and the particular risk to vulnerable student populations. In crafting its State Plan, the Department presumed that the federal government would maintain its commitments to initiatives such as class size reduction, teacher training, extended school day and out-of-school time learning opportunities. Congress has not yet finalized appropriations under ESSA for the upcoming fiscal year, and the amount of funds appropriated will impact the ability of the state, schools, and districts to implement the programs and initiatives described in the State Plan.

A-2. Why does Pennsylvania need to submit a State Plan to the federal government for approval? Shouldn’t education be a local responsibility?

Pennsylvania has a long tradition of local control of public education and Pennsylvania’s ESSA Consolidated State Plan respects that tradition. However, public schools are a function of government, particularly at the state and local levels. Section 14 of the Pennsylvania Constitution establishes a public education system for the commonwealth. In addition, a very significant percentage of the state’s budget is dedicated to public education. The federal government also plays a role in public schooling as well by providing a significant amount of federal funds for specific purposes and establishing the rules and requirements for state and local use of such funds. A condition for receiving this substantial federal funding is a state plan describing how the state, districts and schools will use federal funds.

Public education also plays an important role in helping prepare students to gain the skills, knowledge, and experiences needed to contribute to state, regional, and national workforce needs. As such, Pennsylvania’s ESSA Consolidated State Plan elevates strategies for supporting evidence-based programs and initiatives that promote postsecondary readiness.

A-3. What is the state doing to increase access to high-quality pre-K programs, especially for economically disadvantaged children, families, and communities?

Several commenters noted appreciation for the plan’s focus on improving access to early childhood education. Since taking office in January 2015, Governor Wolf has advocated for historic increases in public education funding at all levels, including early childhood education. Pennsylvania’s ESSA State Plan identifies high-quality early childhood education programs as an evidence-based strategy for helping put young children on a path for success in school and in life. As noted in the Introduction of Pennsylvania’s ESSA State Plan, despite these increases, high-quality care and education are still out of reach for too many of Pennsylvania’s youngest learners and their families. Pennsylvania will continue to work to increase funding for high-quality early childhood education until this need is met. Pennsylvania will also help local education agencies (LEAs) take advantage of the increased flexibility in spending ESSA funds locally to expand early childhood education.
How do Pennsylvania’s current state high school graduation requirements intersect with ESSA? What is the impact of recent legislation allowing students in career and technical education (CTE) programs to graduate without passing the Keystone Exams?

Per state law, Pennsylvania students must score proficient on all three Keystone Exams – Algebra I, Biology, and Literature – in order to graduate high school. This is a state requirement and not part of federal requirements under ESSA; federal law only requires that states establish statewide assessments to evaluate school performance in English language arts, mathematics, and science. Pennsylvania’s accountability system for ESSA requires all high school students to take Keystone Exams in these subjects but does not require students to pass them to graduate.

Last year, Governor Wolf signed into law Act 1 of 2016, which placed a two-year moratorium on the use of Keystone Exams as a state high school graduation requirement. As required by the law, the Department submitted a report to the General Assembly in August 2016 containing several recommendations for student pathways to graduation in addition to scoring proficient on each of the three Keystone Exams.

HB 202, also known as Act 6 of 2017, provides that students in career and technology education (CTE) may demonstrate readiness for postsecondary success in an alternative pathway, and removes the statutory requirement of scoring proficient on Keystone Exams as a state level graduation requirement. However, all students, including CTE students covered by HB 202/Act 6, must still take Keystone Exams as part of Pennsylvania’s federal accountability system. In addition, all public LEAs, including Career and Technology Centers, are still subject to the federal requirement of 95 percent student participation in these required statewide assessments.
B. Long-term Goals

B-1. Why does Pennsylvania establish long-term goals in its ESSA Consolidated State Plan?

ESSA requires states to establish long-term and interim goals for both the all student group and student subgroups, and mandates that these long-term goals be articulated in state plans.

B-2. Why does Pennsylvania’s ESSA Consolidated State Plan only include certain subjects and measures in its long-term goals?

ESSA requires states to establish long-term and interim goals for the all student group and for subgroups in three areas: (1) academic achievement in English language arts and mathematics; (2) English language proficiency for English Learners; and (3) cohort graduation rates (four-year and optional extended-year cohort rates). States and/or local districts and schools could establish long-term goals for other subjects such as science, arts, music, social sciences, and other areas of study, but these are not required to be included in the state’s ESSA plan.

B-3. Why do Pennsylvania’s long-term goals include different end-goals for each student subgroup?

The Department believes that each student – regardless of race, economic circumstance, ability, or zip code – should be educated to the same high standard of achievement. With respect to the long-term goals mandated under ESSA and detailed in the Consolidated State Plan, Pennsylvania aims to reduce, by half, the statewide percentage of non-proficient and non-graduating students by the end of the 2029-30 school year. Pennsylvania developed these long-term goals through analysis of historical, aggregate level achievement and graduation rate data, as well as significant stakeholder engagement and input from technical experts, educators, advocates, and community members.

Finally, while the Department considered setting a uniform, aspirational goal for all student subgroups and schools, such an approach risks minimizing the cumulative impact of decades of systemic inequity in the nation’s public education system and would likely impose additional mandates on individual schools even where schools are already making significant and sustained year-over-year improvement. The Department believes that Pennsylvania’s proposed state accountability system sets high standards and expectations for each child, and that the proposed timeline (2017-18 to 2029-30) fosters a sense of urgency, while providing sufficient opportunity to reach ambitious goals.

B-4. Why did Pennsylvania choose to include both a 4-year and extended 5-year cohort high school graduation rate in its long-term goals and broader accountability system?

ESSA requires that states identify long-term goals for specific indicators, including 4-year cohort high school graduation rates. The federal law also permits states to identify long-term goals for extended-year cohort high school graduation rates, so long as those long-term goals are more rigorous as compared to the long-term goals and measurements of interim progress than the 4-year adjusted cohort rate. Pennsylvania chose to take advantage of this opportunity and details long-term goals for both 4- and 5-year high school graduation rates within its ESSA Consolidated State Plan. Pennsylvania is also seeking flexibility from the U.S. Department of
Education to incorporate both four- and five-year cohort graduation rates within its proposed accountability system for purposes of annual meaningful differentiation of school performance.

Pennsylvania chose to emphasize the five-year cohort graduation rate based on its belief that accountability decisions should consider the full efforts of a high school – including efforts to serve older, under-credited students, and traditionally underserved students. The Department believes – and stakeholder feedback reinforces – that an extended-year cohort graduation rate is a more established and rigorous approach for serving all students, including those who need extra time to achieve readiness for postsecondary success.
C. Consultation and Performance Management

C-1. What is being done to ensure that parents and families receive more information regarding school performance and opportunities for students?

The ESSA accountability indicators described in the plan as well as the broader measures of school success in the Future Ready PA Index will provide more information to parents and the community than is presently available. Moreover, ESSA requires that additional data beyond the Future Ready PA Index indicators and that this additional data be included in an easily accessible, online school report card. This additional ESSA-required data will include building level fiscal data on a per capita basis, among other required reportable measures. ESSA also adds new subgroups for data reporting, including students experiencing homelessness, foster care students, and military-connected students.

C-2. What types of stakeholders did the state engage with during the development of Pennsylvania’s ESSA Consolidated State Plan? Were stakeholders from outside education – such as business and industry leaders, community organizations, or legislators – involved during the planning process?

Since ESSA’s enactment in December 2015, PDE has engaged diverse stakeholders in every corner of the commonwealth to ensure that Pennsylvania’s ESSA Consolidated State Plan – and the implementation that follows – is aligned with the needs of Pennsylvania’s students, schools, and communities. Pennsylvania’s stakeholder engagement efforts consisted of four phases, and reached a wide range of individuals with a shared interest in improving education: students, parents and families, educators, administrators, advocates, business and industry leaders, legislators, community leaders, and advocates. The Department also consulted with national nonpartisan policy and technical experts to solicit additional insight, feedback, and suggestions for specific plan components. These conversations helped shape Pennsylvania’s ESSA Consolidated State Plan, and provided opportunities to inform other policy and programmatic changes that can improve education in the commonwealth.
D. Assessments

D-1. Why does Pennsylvania administer statewide assessments, such as the PSSAs and Keystone Exams?

The PSSAs and Keystone Exams are the federal accountability assessments used in Pennsylvania to comply with the assessment requirements of ESSA. The scope of these tests – which subjects are covered, how often they must be given, and who has to take them – are established by federal and state law and are required as a condition of Pennsylvania’s acceptance of federal education funding.

In addition to fulfilling federal and state requirements, test scores are also an important part of a standards-aligned education system, ensuring that students are mastering content and gaining skills they need. Standardized assessments - those given to all students across the commonwealth - serve as a tool to validate curricula and course work in different schools and districts, e.g., whether fifth grade students in fifth grade classrooms across the commonwealth are learning to the same standards established for fifth grade English language arts and math. Assessments also serve as an important tool in driving instructional practice and identifying when additional interventions or enrichment activities may be needed to help keep students on track for learning and success.

D-2. Why do students need to spend so much time taking standardized tests?

Although assessments are an important – and federally mandated – part of Pennsylvania’s education system, PDE understands concerns regarding the amount of time and resources spent on testing each year. Recognizing that students – and educators – spend a significant amount of time testing, Governor Wolf and Secretary Rivera recently announced that PSSA testing will be reduced by 20 percent for students in grades 3-8 beginning in the spring of 2018.

The scope and frequency of statewide assessments are prescribed by federal and state law. ESSA mandates that assessments in English language arts and mathematics be given every year in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school; assessments in science must be given in grades 4 and 8 and once in high school. Therefore, until the federal law is changed, assessments need to be given according to this schedule.

D-3. Why does Pennsylvania’s proposed accountability system include a reference to test participation rates?

ESSA maintains the requirements of prior federal education law under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that at least 95 percent of all students and of each student subgroup in each LEA and school participate in statewide assessments. This participation requirement is to ensure that test results are a valid representation of student performance in a school and especially for each of with each of its subgroups.

ESSA also requires that this assessment participation requirement be factored into states’ accountability systems. Pennsylvania has proposed including school-level participation rates within its annual public-facing school report cards, also required under ESSA. Schools with rates below 95 percent will be required to develop
and implement state-approved improvement plans, and may be required to complete a school- or LEA-level assessment audit.

D-5. Can standardized assessments be scored and shared with teachers more quickly so results can be used immediately to inform instruction?

Different types of assessments serve different functions. Formative assessments can provide a quick turnaround of results that can be used to inform ongoing instruction. Formative assessments are a very important tool in the classroom and the Department provides a number of options to educators in the commonwealth to use as formative assessments including Classroom Diagnostic Tools and resources on the SAS Portal.

PSSAs and Keystone exams are not intended as formative assessments. They are summative assessments which measure student achievement at the end of a defined period of learning, in this case, the school year for PSSAs and the end of a specific course for Keystone exams.

The purpose of the standardized tests given pursuant to ESSA is to measure the performance and progress of different groups and grade levels of students and ultimately the performance of their schools. While the purpose of these standardized assessments is not to inform ongoing instruction, the Department is actively exploring ways to expedite the scoring and return of PSSAs and Keystone Exams results to students, families, and educators.

D-6. Why do English Learners have to take PSSAs and Keystone Exams?

ESSA establishes the requirement that English Learners must take federal accountability assessments, PSSAs and Keystone, even when they have not attained proficiency in English language. Pennsylvania's proposal specifies when English Learners should take standardized tests and when and how the results should be used in school accountability.
E. Accountability

E-1. Why did Pennsylvania choose to select a minimum N size of 20 students for subgroup reporting?

Under ESSA, states will report on student performance at both the school and subgroup level, including for special needs students, economically disadvantaged students, English learners, and major racial and ethnic groups. In crafting state plans, State Education Agencies (SEAs) were asked to identify a threshold for the number of students, or “minimum N,” that would trigger this subgroup reporting. Pennsylvania has proposed a minimum N of 20, a significant reduction from the state’s current minimum N of 40, which will ensure more transparency in school performance reporting. Several commenters, including child advocacy and education stakeholder groups, expressed support for the state’s proposed minimum N of 20. Others advocated for a lower number (e.g., minimum N of 10), to allow for additional subgroup reporting. The Department carefully considered these requests, and performed a series of data simulations (included in the plan appendix) to outline the impacts of alternate N sizes. Ultimately, the Department determined that an N size of 20 struck an important balance between including as many students as possible in accountability determinations, while not compromising student privacy or the reliability of measures.

E-2. Will students who fit into more than one subgroup category be counted more than once?

Yes, students who meet the criteria for more than one subgroup will be counted in each of them for purposes of reporting subgroup data, subject to the minimum N size of 20.

E-3. Which performance levels will trigger identification as a school in need of comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) under Pennsylvania’s proposed system of annual meaningful differentiation?

Since accountability determinations will be based, in part, on data from the 2017-18 school year – data that is not yet available – it would be inappropriate to prejudge performance or, alternatively, set arbitrary cut points. Still, the Department understands the desire for specificity, and therefore included sample cut points based on historic achievement data (2014-15 and 2015-16 school years) in the final plan submission.

E-4. Why did Pennsylvania choose a dashboard approach to annual meaningful differentiation and accountability instead of alternative methods, such as a summative score?

A significant number of commenters expressed support for the Department’s approach to annual meaningful differentiation, including a dashboard presentation of student achievement, student growth, and other data that will also include summative determinations related to federal accountability (i.e., CSI and TSI). Other commenters urged the Department to use an A-F or numeric grade to describe school performance. The Department acknowledges that traditional summative determinations, when designed well, can provide an initial sense of school performance on traditional achievement measures. Ultimately, however, the Department determined that these same presentations may reduce transparency around indicator-level data, while obscuring important information on access and achievement gaps among subgroups.
E-4. What specific thresholds or benchmarks will Pennsylvania use as exit criteria for schools identified for federal accountability?

Because exit criteria will not be applied for several years (perhaps as late as 2022), flexibility is important to ensure that goals remain both ambitious and achievable. Pennsylvania nevertheless provides additional information in its ESSA Consolidated State Plan, including requiring measurable progress in the area of academic achievement or growth. Pennsylvania cannot identify the specific number of indicators that will satisfy exit criteria, since the number of indicators that apply to schools will be highly variable — for example, many elementary schools will have as few as three accountability indicators, while large, comprehensive high schools will have twice that number.

E-5. How will Pennsylvania ensure that the accountability indicators it has selected will fully meet federal requirements?

Commenters generally praised the Department’s proposed accountability indicators as appropriate for accountability determinations, and of sufficient technical quality to support valid and reliable inferences around school performance. A number of commenters raised important considerations about individual measures; three specific topics are described below:

- **Student growth**: At least two organizations articulated the need for transparency around value-added measures. The Department is committed to providing training and other supports to improve public awareness of value-added measures, and has worked with its Technical Advisory Committee to establish standards for value-added reporting that promote consistency and reliability, including an appropriate N size, averaging multiple years of data, and evaluating value-added measures in the context of other data points.

- **Career readiness**: Commenters generally praised the inclusion of a standards-aligned career readiness indicator; however, others raised concerns as to whether the indicator would meaningfully differentiate school performance. ESSA’s requirements for states to identify school quality and success indicators necessarily results in new measures for school accountability, and obligates states to introduce these indicators in a thoughtful and coherent way. Pennsylvania is committed to further stakeholder engagement in the design and implementation of its career readiness indicators, and will partner with national content and measurement experts to ensure the indicator has sufficient technical quality for the intended purpose. The Department will be posting additional career readiness resources, including web-based trainings, in the late fall of 2018.

- **Chronic absenteeism**: Most feedback concerning the inclusion of chronic absenteeism as an accountability indicator was positive, with several commenters noting the important linkages between student attendance and engagement with academic success.

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2 For example, in its initial State Plan submission, Massachusetts (widely regarded as having the nation’s strongest accountability system) proposed the following: “Massachusetts will identify the exit criteria for schools in need of comprehensive support prior to the first identification in fall 2018.” New Jersey’s exit criteria include: “Improved student performance on accountability indicators as compared to student performance at the time of identification.”
E-6. How did Pennsylvania determine the number of years in which English Learners would not participate in and/or be included in a school’s statewide assessment results for purposes of annual meaningful differentiation?

Pennsylvania has proposed a system in which recently arrived English Learners – defined as those who have been enrolled in any public school in the United States for less than 12 cumulative (not consecutive) months – are provided time to acclimate to a new educational environment and to develop the foundational language skills needed for valid measurement of achievement by state academic assessments. More information about Pennsylvania’s proposed approach and its rationale, is available on p. 43 of Pennsylvania’s ESSA Consolidated State Plan submitted on September 18.
F. Supporting Excellent Educators

F-1. How does Pennsylvania define “effective educator” for purposes of ESSA?

Pennsylvania has deferred finalizing its definition of “effective educator” and plans to participate in additional engagement of relevant stakeholders to finish this work. Members of the Educator Preparation workgroup recommended the following definition for effective teachers for the consideration of the Department: “those who strive to engage all students in learning, demonstrate instructional and subject matter competence, and continuously grow and improve.”

F-2. Why does Pennsylvania use student performance on test scores as part of an educator’s evaluation?

ESSA does not require that states address evaluation systems within their state plans unless federal funding is used to support such systems. Pennsylvania does not use any federal funds to maintain our educator evaluation system. Pennsylvania’s current educator evaluation system is mandated by state law, Act 82 of 2012. As part of its Phase One stakeholder engagement efforts, the Educator Evaluation work group made two consensus-based recommendations to the Department regarding updates to Pennsylvania’s current evaluation system; more information about these recommendations, as well as related research and policy implications, is available in a report developed by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) in October 2016. The Department remains committed to working with stakeholders and the General Assembly on this issue.

F-3. What is Pennsylvania doing to ensure that supports and professional development opportunities are provided to all employees, not just teachers?

All professional employees need access to appropriate support and professional development. ESSA expands the definition of professional development, and provides additional flexibility for LEAs and schools to use Title II funds for support and development of teachers in all subjects, as well as other school staff, including principals and school leaders, librarians, school counselors, paraprofessionals, and other school staff.

F-4. What opportunities does Pennsylvania’s ESSA Consolidated State Plan provide for supporting the development of teacher leaders?

Pennsylvania recognizes that the responsibilities of school leadership no longer fall solely on principals, and that it is vital to promote leadership pathways for current teachers. Pennsylvania’s ESSA Consolidated State Plan identifies supporting teacher leaders as a key strategy to continue to develop effective school and district leaders in Pennsylvania; this new initiative will leverage federal Title II, Part A funding to support innovative teacher leader models and resources aligned to district goals and educator learning needs. Beyond ESSA, the Department also published The Framework for Skills for Teacher Leaders Endorsement Guidelines in April 2017, which outlines the professional knowledge, skills, and competencies that candidates will learn by completing a prescribed sequence of courses (including field placements).²

G. Supporting All Students

G-1. How will Pennsylvania measure students’ access to well-rounded courses and activities? Will the Future Ready PA Index include this type of data?

Pennsylvania’s ESSA Consolidated State Plan defines a well-rounded education as one that includes career and technical education (CTE); English, reading, and language arts; health and physical education; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), including computer science; music and the arts; social studies (history, economics, geography, civics, and government); and world languages. The Department will continue to work with stakeholders to identify opportunities to meet this goal, including through the data reporting requirements under ESSA. The Future Ready PA Index will include more comprehensive measures of school performance, including students’ access to advanced coursework and CTE programs of study, as well as career pathways in a variety of fields that culminate with high-value, industry-recognized credentials. More information about the Future Ready PA Index is available on PDE’s website.

G-2. Why isn’t there more information provided in the plan regarding strategies to support students with disabilities?

Under ESSA, states must report disaggregated data by subgroups, including students with disabilities, and detail plans to support LEAs in improving conditions for teaching and learning. This includes reducing incidents of bullying and harassment in schools, the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices, and use of aversive behavioral interventions (such as restraint and seclusion). In fact, Pennsylvania’s ESSA Consolidated State Plan identifies the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework, designed to improve performance among students with disabilities as well as students who are at risk. While ESSA does require states to identify some strategies for improving services, supports, and outcomes for students with disabilities, more specific requirements, such as inclusion, are beyond the scope of the ESSA Consolidated State Plan. More detailed information regarding strategies for supporting students with disabilities and improving special education programs are detailed in Pennsylvania’s State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR), mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004).

G-3. What is Pennsylvania doing to ensure equity in afterschool, out-of-school, and extracurricular programs and activities?

Out-of-school time and extracurricular programs have significant value to students. Many of these types of programs are described in Section 6 of the plan, including programs funded through the 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) grant program. LEAs and schools have flexibility to spend federal funds on a wide variety of programs that benefit students’ academic, social and emotional well-being, including afterschool and out-of-school time programs.