

COMMENTARY

Which States Are Ready for ESSA?

Some states appear more prepared to implement ESSA than others

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Uncertainty surrounds what lies ahead for education under the Trump administration, but one thing is for sure: The Every Student Succeeds Act will be fully implemented in the 2017-18 school year, devolving more decisionmaking authority to the states.

States are expected to submit plans to the U.S. Department of Education outlining their unique, respective goals around accountability, assessment, monitoring, and support. Furthermore, governors, legislatures, and state schools chiefs must agree on ESSA plans before the state chiefs submit them to the federal government for approval. So, are state education agencies—and, more important, state governments—up to the task?

The federal Education Department has provided two deadlines—April 3 and Sept. 18 of this year—for states to submit these plans. What would lead a state to select the earlier deadline? To find out, we (as a professor and two students of education policy) examined the characteristics of states in the early and later submission groups. This research, conducted over the past five months, is part of an ongoing project at Teachers College, Columbia University, to examine intergovernmental relations under ESSA.



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Our investigation revealed that state-level factors relating to governance and capacity distinguished the April submitters:

- **The early states have an appointed, rather than elected, chief state school officer.** Information from the National Association of State Boards of Education indicates that only three of the 18 states (16 percent) that plan to submit in April elect their state schools chiefs, compared with 10 of 32 (31 percent) in the September group.

What does this mean? States that appoint their state schools chiefs are likelier to be politically aligned with the governor and the legislature, making it easier to reach consensus. And, therefore, able to submit their plans earlier.

- **The early states exercise their authority over districts and schools.** A majority of states have laws that allow them to take control of struggling schools and districts, but not all have exercised that authority. Whereas over half the early states have exercised their authority for school takeover, only one-third of the later submitters have done so. States with takeover experience will have greater capacity to do so in the future, and will likely not need to design new systems for district takeover under ESSA.

- **The early states have been awarded Race to the Top funds.** Political observers have noted that states that received funds from the Obama administration's competitive-grant initiative (which aimed to increase standards and accountability) used them to improve state data systems and increase statewide capacity in support of, for instance, principal leadership. Many of these improvements have remained in place long after the funds dried up.

On the other hand, the legislature in South Carolina, a state that plans to submit in September and did not win those funds, **spent over \$1 million in 2016 to upgrade district data systems that will measure college-and career-readiness** in order to be compliant with the new accountability system under ESSA.

- **The early states belong to a testing consortium.** Nearly 80 percent of early submitters are members of an existing testing consortium (such as PARCC or Smarter Balanced), compared with only a quarter of those who plan to submit in September. This suggests that, while ESSA allows states to experiment with innovative assessments, the early-submission states may continue using the same assessments they adopted under Race to the Top, adding on only a nonacademic indicator of student performance as required by the law, simplifying the process.

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While it is still possible for states to amend when they will submit their plans, our findings suggest that states opting for the earlier deadline will have greater capacity to implement ESSA. Right now, this capacity could also be reflected in stakeholder engagement, since ESSA requires states to engage in "meaningful consultation" with various groups, such as

parents, educators, business leaders, and civic organizations, during the planning process.

In a "Dear Colleague" letter from June 2016, the Education Department advised that "meaningful stakeholder engagement starts at the beginning of the process, when initial planning is getting started; not at the end, when a plan is nearing completion." Together, the language of the law and the subsequent Dear Colleague letter provide a standard by which we could assess stakeholder engagement.

We monitored ESSA stakeholder-engagement strategies through state education agency websites. While it is possible that some stakeholder-engagement strategies are not reported on these websites, online communications by state education agencies are often the primary means of presenting information to citizens and likely serve as the best vehicle through which to engage stakeholders.

Roughly one-quarter of states emerged as clear leaders because of their engagement and thorough interactions with external stakeholders. Among these, some are stand-outs: Ohio and Arizona, for example, not only provided multiple opportunities for stakeholders to engage, both in person and virtually, but also maintained transparency throughout the process.

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Both state education agencies have engaged in multiple statewide listening tours to hear public input, and they published the findings on their websites for public review. Ohio's department of education created an #ESSAOhio hashtag for residents to share ideas. In January, Arizona became the first state to submit a final plan to the federal Education Department, cementing that state's position as the leader of the pack. Ohio will follow suit in April.

Furthermore, roughly half of states have made some, albeit less inclusive, efforts to engage the public in their ESSA planning. The remaining one-quarter—the laggards—are merely keeping citizens informed.

Virginia, a September submitter, organized a series of public hearings, but clustered them all during July and August, which may help explain why they were attended by a

mere 450 residents statewide. West Virginia also opted for the later submission and tells residents they can register for updates on ESSA through the state website, but provides no further information. Connecticut has posted a video of President Barack Obama signing ESSA, alongside a survey, and encourages residents to check back for more—though their declared April deadline is fast approaching.

It is unclear how stakeholder-engagement strategies or submission deadlines will influence student outcomes (the ultimate goal of any education reform), but it is clear states' approaches to ESSA are diverging. We wonder if these differences will mean not only children, but also whole states, may be "left behind" under the new law.

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