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Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): What You Need to Know

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At a Glance

- The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is the nation's main education law for all public schools.
- The law holds schools accountable for how students learn and achieve.
- ESSA aims to provide an equal opportunity for students who get

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special education services.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is the main law for K–12 public education in the United States. It replaced [No Child Left Behind](#). Most schools might start seeing the impact of ESSA in the 2017–2018 school year.

ESSA is a complex law. It affects all students in public schools. That includes the 1 in 5 kids with learning and attention issues.

The Purpose of ESSA

The main purpose of ESSA is to make sure public schools provide a quality education for all kids. ESSA [gives states more of a say](#) in how schools account for student achievement. This includes the achievement of disadvantaged students. These students fall into four key groups:

- Students in poverty
- Minorities
- Students who receive [special education](#)
- Those with limited English language skills

Under ESSA, states get to decide the education plans for their schools within a framework provided by the federal government. The law also offers parents a chance to weigh in on these plans. This is important if your child gets special education services. You have the opportunity to make sure your child's needs are taken into account.

The plan must include a description of the following:

- Academic standards
- Annual testing
- School accountability
- Goals for academic achievement
- Plans for supporting and improving struggling schools
- State and local report cards

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There are several more requirements for states and school districts, but these are the ones that most directly affect kids with learning and attention issues.

ESSA also provides funding for literacy programs and other grants that can help students succeed. And it encourages innovation in how schools teach kids.

Academic Standards

Under ESSA, each state gets to set its own [general education standards](#) and coursework for schools. This is the material students are expected to learn in each grade.

With this law, states must have “challenging” academic standards in reading, math, and science. This means a state’s curriculum must prepare students to succeed in college and in a career. Also, states must apply these standards to *all* students, including those with learning and attention issues.

Annual Testing

Under ESSA, states must test students. But the number and kinds of tests depend on the grade level of the child.

States must test students in reading and math once a year, in grades 3 through 8, as well as once in high school. They must also test kids in science once in grade school, middle school, and high school.

Also, states must provide [accommodations](#) on these tests and list them in students’ IEPs or 504 plans.

Only 1 percent of students can be given “[alternate tests](#).” These tests are different from the state’s general education tests. Just a small number of kids with cognitive disabilities take these kinds of assessments. These tests aren’t usually for students with learning and attention issues.

School Accountability

ESSA requires states to hold schools accountable for how students achieve. This means each state is responsible for having a plan in place to identify schools that are underperforming. In other words, it’s a way for states to know how students are faring.

Under the law, there are specific things that must be in the state’s

accountability plan.

Accountability indicators: ESSA requires each state to choose a minimum of five ways to measure school performance. The first four are academic indicators that are mandatory:

- Academic achievement
- Academic progress
- English language proficiency
- High school graduation rates

The fifth measure must be a way to measure school quality or student success, and states can select more than one way to do this. For example, states can choose to measure any of the following areas:

- [Kindergarten readiness](#)
- Access to and completion of advanced coursework
- College readiness
- Discipline rates
- [Chronic absenteeism](#)

Under ESSA, the state must use at least five measures to evaluate how schools are serving kids. But the first four academic indicators matter the most when states measure school accountability.

Goals for Academic Achievement

States must set achievement goals for students. This means states must come up with a way to measure whether students are improving or not. These goals are important for students who tend to struggle more than others, like students in special education.

The state must set “ambitious” goals for kids who are often the furthest behind. For example, the state may set a long-term goal to raise the high school graduation rates for students in special education. And to reach this long-term goal, there might be shorter-term ways of measuring progress. This can help to make sure students are on track.

These goals are supposed to help struggling students catch up and close the achievement gap with other students. Again, these goals

must be spelled out in each state plan.

Plans for Improving Struggling Schools

ESSA requires states to identify schools that are struggling. And there are two categories of struggling schools that states must try to improve:

- “Comprehensive Support and Improvement” schools, which are the lowest performing schools in a state
- “Targeted Support and Improvement” schools, where certain student groups are consistently underperforming

Under ESSA, once a school is considered “struggling,” then states and school districts must create plans to try to help get the school back on track.

And parents get to weigh in on these plans. The law requires that the plans must use evidence-based teaching and approaches.

State and Local Report Cards

ESSA requires that each state and school district publish report cards. This is a big part of the law. This means states and local school districts must have public information available on how schools are doing.

Among other things, the following must be reported:

- Test score results
- High school graduation rates
- School funding information
- Teacher qualifications

The report cards also give details on “subgroups” of students. This includes minority students, kids in poverty, those learning English and students in special education.

If a state identifies a school or subgroup as struggling, it must notify parents. This is important for students with disabilities. The report cards will show parents how well or poorly schools are serving their kids.

The Role Parents Can Play in ESSA

ESSA requires states to let parents get involved in the accountability process for schools. Their input will help ensure that schools pay attention to kids in special education.

ESSA requires states to include parents in the accountability process in two key areas:

State and local plans: Parents can weigh in on how their state and school district deal with goals for achievement, accountability, and struggling students.

State and school district report cards: Parents have a say in the report cards their state and school district must develop to inform the public how schools are doing.

Parent involvement is now underway in many states. And there are several ways for parents to offer their suggestions. To get involved, you can reach out to [your state's department of education](#) or to Understood's managing partner, the [National Center for Learning Disabilities](#) (NCLD).

You can also [download the ESSA parent advocacy toolkit](#). It includes a participation plan and scripts for talking with state and local education officials.

Reading and Literacy Programs Under ESSA

ESSA provides funding for a number of optional programs to assist schools. This includes two important reading and literacy programs for students who need more help in these areas.

Comprehensive Center on Literacy: One way the law tries to help students, particularly those in special education, is with the creation of a national center for literacy and reading issues.

This center will act as a clearinghouse for information on areas related to literacy and students with disabilities. When it's up and running, the center will be a go-to resource for parents and teachers.

Literacy Education Grant Program: ESSA provides literacy grants to states. In 2016, \$160 million was given for evidence-based literacy instruction. The funding is expected to go to schools this year. This means educators will have the tools to teach skills for reading comprehension like [phonological awareness](#), [decoding](#),

and [reading fluency](#).

This is a voluntary program. States will be able to apply to the U.S. Department of Education to receive a grant.

School Innovation Under ESSA

Under ESSA, schools continue to have the flexibility to teach students in different ways. And school innovations can help kids with learning and attention issues.

For example, ESSA supports [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#). This is an approach that offers students many ways to learn the same material. UDL isn't just helpful for students in special education. It allows *all* students to use different methods to show what they know. And that gives them an equal chance to succeed in school.

ESSA also encourages states to expand [personalized learning](#). This approach aims to meet students where they are. It allows kids to learn at their own pace and to have a say in how and what they learn.

Read [what experts believe ESSA will bring](#) for students with learning and attention issues. [Compare federal and state law](#) when it comes to special education. And if you're ready to get involved, be sure to [download the ESSA parent advocacy toolkit](#).

Key Takeaways

- The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) affects all kids, including those with IEPs and 504 plans.
 - ESSA encourages states to expand personalized learning.
 - ESSA requires states to involve parents in the accountability process for schools.
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About the Author

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Reviewed by



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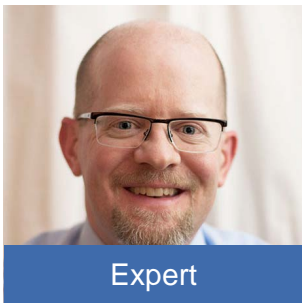
A mom helped streamline the SAT accommodations process at her child's school.





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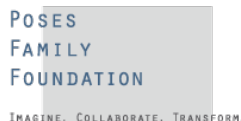
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