

States as change agents under ESSA

Fewer federal mandates open the door to state creativity and innovation, but that raises questions about state capacity and removes the political cover that had been provided by federal rules.

By Joanne Weiss and Patrick McGuinn



Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), federal education mandates — particularly around accountability — are decreasing, which means states will have more flexibility and authority than they've had in decades. With this increased state power comes the responsibility to improve educational outcomes for every student in the state. State education agency leaders are confronting great change and great opportunity as many agencies move away from a

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focus on compliance with federal regulations, state statutes, and programmatically dictated uses of funds and toward a broader focus on supporting districts and schools in improving outcomes for all students. As the definition of and responsibility for success changes in this new environment, the roles of state education agencies deserve reconsideration.

There is no universally correct set of roles for the state education agency (SEA). The activities a particular state agency should or shouldn't engage in varies. Each SEA has different educational strengths and assets to build upon, different needs to address, and a unique set of laws to follow and traditions to respect. As a new paper from the Fordham Institute (Zeehandelaar & Griffith, 2015) articulates, SEAs operate under very different authorities granted by their state's constitution, legislation, and enabling regulations and how distributed that authority is varies from one state to the next. Some SEAs operate in concert with other entities, such as state boards of education, professional licensing bodies, early childhood agencies, and/or higher education agencies. In other states, one education agency regulates most or all of these functions. Some states require heavy involvement of stakeholders in policy making; others do not.

Some states vest more decision-making authority at the state level, while others give significant power to local districts. Some have fewer, countywide districts; others have hundreds of smaller districts. Some have regional intermediaries that support the SEA's work; others do not. Thus, while every state has the common responsibility of building educational systems that drive toward increasingly excellent and equitable outcomes for all students, the approach for getting there in Rhode Island may differ dramatically from that in Wyoming or Florida.

In July 2015, the authors of this article participated in an Aspen Institute convening of education leaders to discuss the future role of the SEA. The output of this meeting was a guide for state education leaders on which roles are "essential" for SEAs to lead, what roles SEAs might "possibly" take on, and what roles are "unsuitable." This paper draws heavily from that discussion, and offers our take on how states should think about the essential areas of SEA leadership in the ESSA era.

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Essential roles

Despite the variations in approach that will inevitably arise, SEAs must take leading roles in five areas: articulating the state's educational vision and goals; selecting and implementing the state's standards and assessments; designing and implementing the state's accountability system; administering, implementing, and overseeing state and federal funding and other programs; and communicating about critical educational issues with stakeholders across the state.

#1. Articulate vision, priorities, and goals.

The SEA's work ideally should begin with state education leaders and stakeholders defining the vision for education in the state. Done well, this process results in a shared vision that is understood, committed to, and supported by key actors across the state and therefore is less polarized, more stable, and more sustainable over time and throughout leadership transition. Such a vision helps clarify responsibilities across the state's educational system, helps ensure coherence and alignment both within the SEA and across coordinating agencies, and provides stakeholders and districts with clear mandates to shape issues they own.

Two strong examples can be found in Delaware's Student Success 2025 and in Alberta, Canada's Inspiring Education. Both required significant investments of time, but the work in these places is now well understood. Stakeholders hold each other accountable for achieving goals, and broad support contributes to progress and sustainability.

#2. Support academic improvement through implementing standards and assessments.

In virtually every state, often in cooperation with the state board of education, the SEA leads work that is at the heart of teaching and learning. SEAs oversee the adoption of high-quality academic standards. They select, administer, and report results for standardized assessments aligned to these standards. And, in some states, they adopt or recommend instructional materials aligned to the standards.

ESSA includes several notable changes in states' responsibilities vis-à-vis standards setting. Under the new law, states must demonstrate that they have "challenging academic standards" aligned with "entrance requirements for credit-bearing coursework in the [state's] system of public higher education" and with "state career and technical education standards." While all states have a specific process for adopting new standards, few if any take into account the role of the business and higher education communities in arbitrating quality. How this new requirement will be implemented at the federal level

remains to be seen, but it is not too early for states to rethink their processes for validating that their academic standards prepare students for success in postsecondary education and the workplace.

Under ESSA, the states still must assess students annually in grades 3-8 and at least once in high school (with all results disaggregated by student subgroup). In addition, the new law requires that states assess higher-order thinking skills, continuing the migration away from fill-in-the-bubble tests toward more authentic evaluations of what students know and can do. Assessments are an important lever for academic improvement — they animate the state's academic standards, bringing to life the words on the page by showing educators what is expected of a student who has mastered the standards. Thus, one of the SEA's most critical roles is ensuring that state assessments are high-quality — that they align to the state's academic standards and assess the full range of those standards (including those higher-order skills that are difficult to assess through traditional means), and

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that they report results in useful and actionable ways.

In addition, many states are responsible for selecting or recommending curriculum resources aligned to the standards. At a time when many states' standards are relatively new, identifying aligned curriculum resources can be especially challenging. In 2012, Louisiana began addressing this need by working with a cadre of master teachers to identify strong resources. Through a fast, rigorous, and ongoing review process, the teachers vet both core curriculum and supplemental materials, publish the ratings, and offer guidance to educators on addressing gaps for close-but-not-fully aligned programs. With over 80% of districts in the state now using recommended instructional materials in mathematics, this SEA-coordinated service has proven effective.

#3. Design and implement accountability systems.

Designing and implementing the state's accountability system is a critical role for SEAs in every state, of-

ten in cooperation with the state board of education. Accountability systems generally have three components: indicators of success (reported by school, district, and state, with test results disaggregated by student subgroup); identification of school quality based on these indicators; and consequences for the lowest-performing schools.

Ideally, states design their accountability systems to embody and advance their vision, priorities, and goals. For example, if a state's vision centers around creating an educational system that improves continuously, then its report cards might focus on year-over-year progress. If, instead, a state is driving toward specific proficiency goals, its report cards might highlight statuses relative to those goals. For accountability systems to fulfill their potential to drive change, they must measure and report on the outcomes states most value and the educational conditions they are seeking to create.

The elements of the state's accountability system must, of course, comply with ESSA requirements. They must "meaningfully differentiate" schools using multiple indicators of academic achievement (including proficiency on state assessments, high school graduation rates, growth or another state-wide indicator for K-8 schools), an English language proficiency indicator (for English learners only), and one or more other indicators of the state's choice. This offers a wide berth to states in determining key indicators of success.

Designing an accountability system that advances the state's vision for educational success is among the most critical tasks SEAs will undertake. What are the state's design principles: Clarity? Simplicity? Precision? Fairness? What are the key priorities? Closing achievement gaps? Fueling growth in reading and mathematics achievement? Providing a holistic view of school quality? What indicators provide the best measuring sticks of progress and performance? What indicators give schools the best insight into diagnosing and addressing potential problems? How should these be combined into ratings? Why? The Council for Chief State School Officers and other organizations are supporting states in the critical task of next-generation accountability systems design.

#4. Administer, implement, and oversee state and federal funding and programs.

Once vision and principles are established and priorities are settled, implementation is critical. Implementation is a shared responsibility between the SEA and districts. But the SEA's primary implementation role is to make sense of and enforce statutes and policies, including the administration of state and

Learn more about ESSA

ESSA fact sheets

The Education Trust, which prioritizes equity issues, has published an overview about ESSA and six other fact sheets detailing various aspects of ESSA (standards, assessments, accountability systems, public reporting, teachers & leaders, and funding). edtrust.org/issue/the-every-student-succeeds-act-of-2015/

Everything you need to know about ESSA

The Alliance for Excellent Education has produced both print and video materials with concise but comprehensive analyses of key areas within ESSA. all4ed.org/ESSA/

Implementing ESSA

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute has produced a variety of information about implementation. Search on ESSA at the site to locate its blogs, videos, and other publications. edexcellence.net

Roles and responsibilities of the state education agency

The Aspen Institute convened a meeting in 2015 to explore how the work of state agencies will change under ESSA. aspeninstitute.org/publications/roles-responsibilities-state-education-agency

Unpacking ESSA: Opportunities and risks

EducationCounsel's team of legal and policy experts explore many aspects of ESSA through a series of blog posts. educationcounsel.com/essa-opportunities-risks/

For reforms to succeed, state policy changes must change district practice, district practices must change the behavior of principals and teachers, and school-level changes must deliver improved student performance.

federal funding programs, through three key activities: regulation, compliance monitoring, and technical assistance.

In general, SEAs serve local districts best when they are minimalist in compliance and generous with technical assistance. This has the potential, however, to upend the structures of many SEAs, which typically allocate large teams to compliance monitoring and have fewer experts providing guidance and support. Yet, even where SEA expertise and resources are scarce, SEAs still can choose to prioritize support. They can target regulations that will produce higher effects. They can strengthen existing regulations or develop new rules consistent with the state's vision and priorities. They can pay less attention to less critical regulations and eliminate obsolete rules. With this new mindset, two principles should help guide the SEAs' core administrative work: effect and efficiency.

#5. Develop two-way communications with stakeholders and the public.

Under ESSA, state communications are likely to be even more crucial, as national narratives take a backseat to state-driven ones. The work of driving toward a statewide education vision will require that states keep stakeholders engaged, aligned, and active. SEAs will have to keep district leaders and educators up to date on plans and requirements and solicit input and feedback to help shape activities. SEAs will have to support their governors, state boards, and legislatures with policy ideas and policy implementation expertise. They will have to explain educational issues to families and the public, report to them on progress, and solicit their comments and input. They will have to support or lead interagency activities by coordinating services across higher education, preschool, social services, and healthcare. And they will have to ramp up the engagement of business leaders, community organizations, and advocacy groups.

To meet these needs, SEAs may have to establish and manage new infrastructures and processes.

They need venues that allow them to hear public and stakeholder input on policies, engage in authentic two-way dialogues around key issues, speak clearly and accurately to diverse audiences, and maintain feedback loops to support continuous improvement. SEAs also may need to use new communications vehicles such as social media and mobile communications and build new types of partnerships. Yet historically, SEA communications teams — which often consist of one or two entry-level staffers — have limited capacity to do the job that is now required of them. At this time of intense change, a deeper investment in communications is likely required.

Possible roles

Beyond the essential roles, additional roles for SEAs will vary dramatically from one state to the next and perhaps from one year to the next. These additional roles might include accelerating sharing and learning across the state, directly turning around low-performing schools and districts, supporting the development of a high-quality educator workforce, providing professional learning opportunities, and driving innovation. In some states, taking on many or all of these additional roles may be appropriate while in other states, laws, funding, context, or capacity may limit what can be done. In all cases, prioritizing the SEAs' additional roles will be important.

A few guiding principles may help. The first priority is to do the work required by the SEA under its state law. In addition to those items described above as essential, examples might include authorizing charter schools and/or managing teacher evaluation or licensure systems. SEAs should ensure that this work is aligned with the state's vision, or to the extent that it is not, work with legislators or others to address mismatches. Second, states should remove from the SEAs' to-do list any work that can be adequately done at the local level that otherwise would divert critical resources or be less useful/relevant if done by the SEA. Finally, the SEA should prioritize roles most aligned to the state's vision and most likely to advance it.

Unsuitable roles

Developing a universal list of what SEAs should stop doing is difficult. Yet SEAs must think honestly about their own capacity and staff expertise to deliver on high-quality programs, policies, and services, and they must prioritize their work to match their capacity to deliver. Given this, three lessons apply. First, SEAs should not micromanage their districts or displace local authority. That is, SEAs should not dictate how districts spend their money, engage in local

staffing or personnel decisions, or define school-level policies such as class-size requirements or staffing ratios. Second, SEAs should not drive resources to ineffective programs. This remains all too common. Third, while expanded and effective communication by SEAs is critical, SEAs should not be the sole messengers or communicators. They must ensure broad understanding of policies, goals, issues, and plans, and a broad network of knowledgeable partners.

Conclusion

ESSA presents fewer federal mandates, which opens the door to state creativity and innovation. But having fewer mandates also raises questions about state capacity and removes the political cover that was, until recently, provided by federal rules. With this reduction in federal direction and oversight, the onus to define and implement a vision for the state's educational future will rest almost entirely with the state's educational leadership. And while leading change is done by a few, it is work that can be undone by many. States therefore should be very deliberate in fostering conditions within the state that are conducive to educational improvement and consistent with the state's vision — building statewide understanding of the problems, support for the proposed solutions, and pressure to perform at higher levels.

This will not be easy. Driving educational change from the state capitol all the way down to the classroom is extraordinarily difficult. For reforms to succeed, state policy changes must change district practice, district practices must change the behavior of principals and teachers, and school-level changes must deliver improved student performance. As a result, the vigor and effectiveness of SEAs — and their ability to support local districts — is critical, particularly in an era of declining federal leadership. But state commitment alone may not be sufficient, for, as many scholars have noted, states suffer from a “capacity gap” that undermines their ability to monitor and enforce policy mandates and provide technical guidance to districts. In a survey of SEAs, Cynthia Brown and her colleagues noted that a wave of recent reforms had “put immense stress on agencies that were originally conceived as tiny departments primarily designed to funnel money to local school districts. Yet it is not at all clear that state education agencies are prepared for this demanding new role” (2011).

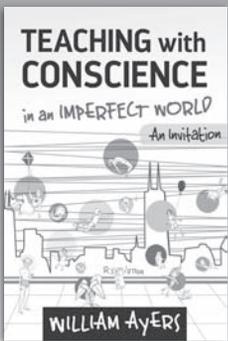
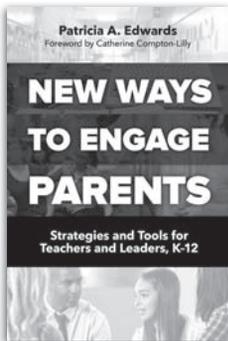
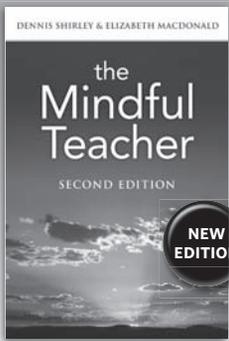
SEA budgets have long been funded dis-

proportionately by the federal government (rather than from their own state appropriations), but the state role in education is expanding while federal coffers are not. States must acknowledge SEAs' critical role in the ESSA era and fund them accordingly so they have adequate resources to do this work. For their part, SEAs will need to reorganize themselves and prioritize their functions to adapt to the new demands being placed on them. As they do so, they will need to identify areas of comparative advantage and economies of scale — where the state can do something better and/or more efficiently than districts. If we are to close the country's long-standing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps and address concerns about the nation's overall educational performance, states and SEAs will increasingly need to lead the effort. ■

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