Federal regulations under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) restricted the authority of state boards of education (SBEs) in many areas of state policy, making it difficult to align a state’s education policies. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) releases states from many of NCLB’s restrictive measures and gives states autonomy to establish a coherent system of policies focused on student learning. Yet in the rush to focus on ESSA’s nuts and bolts, states may lose sight of foundational issues that will guide long-term development of an effective, efficient standards-based system.

LEARNING STANDARDS
In a standards-based system, learning standards cannot be adopted or implemented in isolation. They are the hub of all other education system components, permeating all system functions and serving as the lens through which state board members view policy design and development. Regardless of which standards are adopted, they must ground all strategic planning and subsequent decisions. In this way, a standards-based system keeps learning as its primary focus.

Since standards are the hub to which all other policies connect and the foundation upon which an accountability system is built, SBEs must ensure the right learning standards are in place as they begin ESSA implementation. If a board determines that it needs to review or update its learning standards, now is the time to do so—before making other ESSA-related decisions.

WAIVER REVIEW
Effective August 1, 2016, states are released from the requirements of their approved NCLB waivers. However, states should revisit their waivers as a precursor to ESSA implementation because most already reflect what states believe to be important for their schools and districts. With the involvement of all stakeholders, each state strategically chose student assessments, measures of effectiveness, professional learning opportunities, and teacher evaluation processes for their waiver.

Before designing a new compliance system under ESSA, states can decide which components they ought to keep and identify less effective components to eliminate. All state waivers have some quality elements embedded in them that can serve as a starting place for system design under ESSA. There is no need to start from scratch if existing components are serving a state well and effectively improving schools.

MEASURES OF EFFECTIVENESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY
ESSA affects measures of effectiveness and accountability most directly. The new law maintains some of the measures from NCLB: proficiency on state tests, English-language proficiency, and graduation rates. States are required for the first time to add at least one indicator of school success that allows for meaningful differentiation of student performance: student engagement, educator engagement, access to and completion of advanced coursework, postsecondary readiness, school climate/safety, or other measures that states identify as driving school improvement.

States should begin by asking two simple questions: 1) Which measures exemplify state values? 2) Are there quality data the state already collects that could serve this purpose without creating new measures that...
as a board. A board’s strategic planning begins with learning standards at the center and moves outward to corollary policies (figure 2). This process institutionalizes the continuous improvement that the board seeks for the system, for districts, for schools, and for itself. By this process, the board guides ESSA implementation systemically.

Perhaps the most difficult part of operationalizing a standards-based system is decision making. The process is the obverse of strategic planning: While planning begins with standards and moves toward actions that improve student achievement, decision making points back to the center, examining how each choice will serve the core mission and ensuring coherence to all parts of a state’s ESSA implementation plan.

CONCLUSION
ESSA is in many ways a U-turn from its predecessor, NCLB. It gives states significant leeway in a wide range of areas. But before rushing to the fine print of the new legislation, a state board should reflect on the successes and shortcomings of its current system, reaffirm what it values, and establish student learning as the core focus of all policy, strategic planning, and decision making.

ESSA’s success will largely be judged by how well SBEs thoughtfully and strategically implement it over the long term. A rushed implementation without consideration of fundamental issues will fail flat. States must play the long game and keep the end in mind. Fast-forward to a time 10 to 15 years hence when Congress once again reauthorizes ESSA. Will Congress laud SBEs as examples of strategic, thoughtful leadership that resulted in high levels of student achievement and vastly improved schools? What will state boards’ legacy be when ESSA expires? If boards start with that end in mind, they will exemplify the proactive legacy leadership that will truly benefit students and schools.