

For students to have a shot at attaining high standards, all teachers must be part of a continuous learning system.

Stephanie Hirsh

Using ESSA to Put Teaching and Learning First

When I was a school board member and district administrator, parents were always asking me, “How can we ensure that our children are assigned the best teacher in the grade level and school?” Parents, educators, advocates, and state policymakers alike want excellence in teaching and learning every day for every educator and student, and this is also the vision that drives my organization, Learning Forward. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gives states renewed authority as well as leverage to make this vision a reality. And the role of state boards of education in this process cannot be underestimated.

Consider this theory of action (figure 1). States that accept the ESSA goals of equity and excellence adopt career- and college-ready standards to define their expectations and accountability systems to measure their progress. Lacking a clear strategy for helping students meet higher standards, states will make limited progress. The key move toward enacting this theory of action is an investment in learning systems that give educators the support they need to help students learn.

The goal of a learning system is to have every educator engaging in continuous improvement. At its core, it ensures that every classroom teacher is a member of at least one learning team

that meets several times a week to learn and solve instructional problems together. The learning teams engage in ongoing cycles of learning and improvement that are data driven and skillfully facilitated, often by a teacher leader or instructional coach. These learning cycles enable team members to create more focused lessons and assessments and build members’ collective responsibility for all students in the grade level or school. By learning and working collaboratively, educators create a learning culture where they purposely share best practices and expertise across classrooms and schools so all students experience great teaching every day.

ESSA provides states with authority as well as the funding flexibility to support this vision for educator support and development and to set expectations for school systems to do the same. The U.S. Department of Education’s early edition of the consolidated planning application asked states to “provide a description of their systems of professional growth and improvement” if they intend to use Title II funds for professional development.¹ Similar questions appeared in sections related to continuous improvement and monitoring, technical assistance, school improvement, and leadership development. While significant changes have been made in the consolidated applications, states that recognize the importance of investing and supporting their educators could benefit from taking time to answer these questions. When states focus first on how they want teachers to receive the feedback and support they need to improve their practice and thus the outcomes for their students, they are more likely to produce a coherent, aligned learning system.

In addition, the law itself lays the foundation (see table 1) for this vision of a learning system: By our count, Congress included the term “professional development” 79 times. It also includes a revised, much more powerful definition of professional development that is “sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short-term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused...”² Take note: These words do not describe better workshops or programs. They describe the type of support that all educators need to improve

Figure 1. Contribution of Professional Development



Table 1. ESSA Support for Components of Learning Systems

Shared vision and standards	Data-driven goals and evaluation	Resource alignment	Leadership capacity	Sustained implementation with change management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage ESSA's updated definition of PD to strengthen quality. • Use ESSA plans to articulate a vision for learning systems. • Adopt (or use current) Standards for Professional Learning to establish and monitor baseline. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use evidence and data to put your vision into practice. • Ask LEAs to provide data that support goals and data that will be used to evaluate strategies and drive improvement in local funding applications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use Title I and II funds to advance equity. • Leverage School Improvement Grants. • Expand collaborative time under Title IV. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in leadership with ESSA's 3% set-aside. • Advance leadership for equity through Title I. • Use Teacher and School Leader Incentive Fund to advance leadership capacity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deepen stakeholder engagement related to learning AND improvement systems. • Leverage ESSA continuous improvement theme to strengthen implementation.

their practice daily and deliver better outcomes for students. Discrete professional development events will not improve schools. Only when professional development is embedded in learning systems that support teacher learning teams and other forms of external support will it help educators improve their performance.

States have authority and responsibility for five key components of learning systems: a shared vision and standards, data-driven goals and evaluation, resource alignment, leadership capacity, and sustained implementation and change management.

Shared Vision and Standards

State boards of education, in partnership with state and local education agencies, have the authority and the opportunity to promote a vision for teaching and learning in the state. Just as student standards set expectations for student success, state education leaders may define the kind of teaching they want students to experience and the kinds of learning they want both students and teachers to experience.

At the heart of this new vision for teaching and learning is a learning culture that recognizes the value of continuous improvement for long-term, sustained gains. State boards can provide a narrative that defines the learning culture and paints a compelling vision of its North Star. For example, such a statement may begin as follows:

In a learning culture, mind-sets, structures, and practices align to improve

individual and institutional practice.

In a learning culture, every educator is a member of a learning team committed to the success of its students, schools, district, and state.

Achieving this vision does not happen overnight, but it is possible, as several countries and select U.S. schools and school systems have demonstrated.³ To build a shared vision of high-quality professional learning, the Florida Department of Education organized “learning journeys” for district and school professional learning leaders across the state. Department staff identified organizations in other sectors in which adults continually learn and improve. By visiting organizations with successful learning cultures, district and school leaders experienced new approaches to adult learning. During the 2016–17 school year, participating educators developed and tested model learning experiences aligned to the state vision; they plan to share lessons and scale up their successes.⁴

Vision statements offer one place to start. Other options include adopting new teaching and professional learning standards to describe excellent teaching and quality professional learning. These standards can describe progressions from novice to proficient to exemplary teaching. While detailing the critical elements of professional learning, the standards also provide an affirmation that the state board recognizes the importance of quality professional learning and wants to ensure that educators receive nothing less.

These words do not describe better workshops or programs. They describe the type of support that all educators need to improve their practice daily.

Ongoing data analysis and evaluation position state boards of education to make key midcourse corrections or substantive changes when evidence suggests they are not on the path toward their goals.

Data-Driven Goals and Evaluation

Data use is both a priority in a learning system and a powerful representation of continuous improvement. Once education leaders establish a vision and set standards, their collection and analysis of relevant data pinpoint the gaps between the standards and the current status. Data about their state and local needs, considered in light of research-based evidence, can help decision makers and planners choose strategies and programs that they believe will narrow the gaps. State boards as well as state and local education agencies must engage in ongoing data analysis and evaluation at multiple levels, including assessing the extent to which programs or strategies are advancing their vision, promoting shifts in teaching aligned with standards of effectiveness, and ultimately, producing better student outcomes. These conversations position state boards of education to make key midcourse corrections or substantive changes when evidence suggests they are not on the path toward their goals.

Foundational to data-driven decision making are policymakers and educators' knowledge and skills. Without them, decision makers will gain little from data analysis. In addition, policymakers should expect that educators have access to, and are using, data (including student summative and formative measures, attendance, attitudes, and more) as they proceed from goal setting and intentional learning to implementation, monitoring, and refinement. By ensuring these resources are accessible in all schools, state boards can be reasonably confident that teaching and learning will improve every day.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education gives districts web-based resources and support for this task. In an interactive learning module, the state provides step-by-step processes to evaluate and improve professional learning.⁵

Leadership Capacity

Principal leadership is second only to teaching in affecting school performance, and it requires attention to recruitment, preparation, evaluation, and ongoing support.⁶ Likewise, states need great people to lead the creation and sustained commitment to professional learning systems at every level of the education enterprise. The foundation for effective leadership

is effective professional learning. It must equip district, school, and teacher leaders with the knowledge and skills they need to perform their jobs, including the ability to help create a culture of professional learning for everyone else. In top-performing systems, leaders receive sustained, intensive support, experiencing the strategies and practices that they will then facilitate themselves.⁸

State boards of education may use ESSA as an opportunity to revisit performance standards for principal supervisors, principals, and teacher leaders. They may also describe new career pathways to ensure that succession systems are in place. Districts need more teacher leaders to facilitate team learning as well as assume other responsibilities associated with new learning structures in schools. States need long-term plans for recruiting, developing, and supporting leadership at the state, district, and school levels. Such strategies provide the “bench” for sustained improvement and growth.

An example of a “grow your own” strategy is the Maryland Department of Education's Promising Principals Academy, which prepares and positions the state's most talented leaders to lead schools toward attainment of higher standards. Superintendents choose two of the most promising assistant principals from each district. Each participant receives coaching from a former principal, and all members of the cohort meet multiple times each year for multiday retreats focused on instructional leadership and core competencies. More than 40 alumni have been promoted within their districts since the program's 2014 launch.⁹

Resource Alignment

State boards of education have a fiscal responsibility to ensure that state and district resources are allocated in a manner that evidence has shown is most likely to lead to achievement of their goals. Traditional thinking—“this is the way we have always done it”—poses a challenging barrier to realigning resources, however. To surmount it, state boards may ask the state education agency (SEA), local education agencies (LEAs), or both for the rationale and evidence to support their resource allocation decisions. Many resources are available from ED's What Works Clearinghouse and the Institute for Education Sciences, as well as

nonprofits like Education Resource Strategies. They might follow it up with “deeper dives” into discussions of returns on investments or program results.

State boards may discover that the data they need are hard to obtain. One way to ensure greater access going forward is to request that districts describe how they will collect data and conduct evaluations for all major expenditures.

In addition to investments in people and programs, states and local school systems make considerable investments in time and technology. Similar questions could be asked about the impact of these investments. If a state embraces the vision for the learning team, then it will want to study how time is allocated and consider options for reorganizing the school day and calendar to support team learning.

Sustained Implementation and Change Management

State boards are all too familiar with promises of great results from new programs and strategies that end up yielding little. Poor implementation is one reason. Change theory emphasizes the importance of effective performance management. The final responsibility of the state board, then, is to develop its own performance management plan. That plan may address effective stakeholder engagement, clear communications, well-defined roles and responsibilities, clear action plans, feedback loops, and continuous improvement protocols.

Kentucky exemplifies state-level commitment to managed implementation. The Kentucky Department of Education has created a specialized delivery unit to “build the agency’s capacity in project management, data analysis, and data-driven decision making.”¹⁰ The unit monitors progress on each of the state’s strategic priorities. Furthermore, as part of the agency’s strategic planning, unit staff members participate in cross-functional teams. A statewide teacher advisory council also gives the state commissioner of education input on progress and needs. Finally, the department gives local leaders real-time feedback about their progress through its regional instructional specialists and its work with district teams in its statewide Leadership Networks initiative.

Another critical component of this action plan must be ongoing policy and regulatory

review. Policy is often used to provide direction and guardrails. Yet there are times when policies inhibit innovation or adoption of new programs and thus must be changed. State boards can use stakeholder engagement to help them to understand the impact of their policies, what is working, and what is problematic. State boards can use this feedback loop to leverage the best outcomes out of its policy- and rule-making authority.

Conclusion

State boards of education hold primary responsibility for establishing compelling visions for education and ensuring that conditions exist to sustain quality teaching and learning. When states decide to put teaching and learning first, they will find that continuous improvement grounded in learning systems is the most logical strategy. State boards can and should use ESSA to advance efforts to develop learning systems that ensure successful teaching and learning for all.

Ultimately, state boards of education must collaborate to be effective. They will work with SEAs through rule making and planning. They can influence LEA actions by contributing to the local applications for federal funding allocations. State boards, in partnership with SEAs, can guide progress toward the creation of learning systems in every district and school. By raising critical questions aligned to the five essential components, state boards will launch important conversations that move their state closer to the mark: when all educators get daily support needed to ensure that all students experience quality teaching every day. ■

¹Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), P.L. 114-95, Sec. 2102, p. 1925.

²ESSA, Sec. 8002, p. 2096.

³B. Jensen et al., *Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems* (Washington, DC: National Center on Education and the Economy, 2016); Learning Forward and Education Counsel, *A New Vision for Professional Learning: A Toolkit to Help States Use ESSA to Advance Learning and Improvement Systems* (Dallas: Learning Forward, 2017).

⁴Learning Forward and Education Counsel, *A New Vision for Professional Learning*.

⁵Ibid.

⁶P. Manna, *Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning: Considerations for State Policy* (New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2015), <http://www.wallace-foundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Developing-Excellent-School-Principals.pdf>.

⁷K. Leithwood, “Strong Districts and Their Leadership,” a paper commissioned by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education and the Institute for Education Leadership (2013), <http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/downloads/Strong%20Districts-2.pdf>; J.P. Spillane and J. Z. Sherer, “A Distributed

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Policy Attributes.”

³M. S. Polikoff, A. C. Porter, and J. Smithson, “How Well Aligned Are State Assessments of Student Achievement with State Content Standards?” *American Educational Research Journal* 48, no. 4 (2011): 965–95.

⁴For a review, see A. Martone and S. G. Sireci, “Evaluating Alignment between Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction,” *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 4 (2009): 1332–61. For a newly developed methodology, see N. Doorey and M. Polikoff, *Evaluating the Content and Quality of Next Generation Assessments* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2016).

⁵For a review, see D. N. Figlio and S. Loeb, “School Accountability,” in E. A. Hanushek, S. Machin, and L. Woessmann, eds., *Handbook of the Economics of Education* (North-Holland, The Netherlands: Elsevier, 2011).

⁶C. E. Rouse et al., “Feeling the Florida Heat? How Low-Performing Schools Respond to Voucher and Accountability Pressure,” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 5, no. 2 (2013): 251–81.

⁷See, for instance, M. S. Polikoff, “How Well Aligned Are Textbooks to the Common Core Standards in Mathematics?” *American Educational Research Journal* 52, no. 6 (2015): 1185–211. See also Polikoff, Porter, and Smithson, “How Well Aligned Are State Assessments?”

⁸M. S. Polikoff et al., “The Waive of the Future? School Accountability in the Waiver Era,” *Educational Researcher* 43, no. 1 (2014): 45–54.

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²K. Seashore-Louis, et al., “How Does Leadership Affect Student Achievement? Results from a National US Survey,” *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 21, no. 3 (2010): 315–36.

³K. Leithwood et al., “How Leadership Influences Student Learning,” (New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2004).

⁴Wallace Foundation, *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning* (New York, 2011), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/effective-principal-leadership/Documents/The-School-Principal-as-Leader-Guiding-Schools-to-Better-Teaching-and-Learning.pdf>.

⁵The district organized its work around principles articulated in Jim Collins and Morten T. Hansen, *Great by Choice™* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), whose titular maxim grounded the district’s strategic plan, theory of action, as well as its Coherence Framework.

⁶For example, one group included representatives from Maryland Department of Education’s Breakthrough Center, the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL), principals, and central office administrators and executives from the district. See Maryland State Department of Education, Maryland Instructional Leadership Framework (2016), <http://archives.marylandpublicschools.org/NR/rdonlyres/DF957230-EC07-4FEE-B904-7FEB176BD978/19877/MDInstructionalLeadershipFramework.pdf>; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, *Educational Leadership Program Standards* (Reston, VA: NPBEA, 2011).

⁷PGCPS partners with Johns Hopkins University, Bowie State University, the University of Maryland-College Park, and McDaniel College. We started by addressing preservice programs at each and then developing a common language around expectations, guided by the district standards.

⁸National Policy Board for Educational Administration, *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (Reston, VA: NPBEA, 2015).

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⁸Jensen et al., *Beyond PD*; The Wallace Foundation, “School Leadership,” Knowledge Center [website] (2017), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/pages/default.aspx>.

⁹Learning Forward and Education Counsel, *A New Vision for Professional Learning*.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 39.