ESSA Advocacy Toolkit
Welcome parent advocates!

On behalf of the National Center for Learning Disabilities, managing founding partner of Understood, I’m excited that you’re interested in learning more about the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the nation’s new K–12 education law.

As parents of kids with learning and attention issues, we know the important role of advocacy in supporting our children. Now, it’s time to take that passion and interest to a higher level. We need to make sure our kids’ needs are front and center as states and school districts start to make this new law a reality for every public school.

ESSA offers states a new opportunity to improve outcomes for the nation’s 6 million students with identified disabilities. Importantly, the law says that states and school districts must engage with the parent community.

The goal of this toolkit is to help parents like you become strong and informed advocates. The toolkit highlights the parts of ESSA that have the greatest potential to impact our kids. And it provides tools to help you have meaningful conversations with policymakers, educators and other state and local leaders.

You’ll find answers to these questions:

- How can I influence the efforts of my state and school district to improve schools in my community?
- Who can I talk with to make the biggest impact?
- What can I talk about and what resources should I share to be an effective advocate?
- How can I prepare and engage with others in my community?

We hope this toolkit will be your guide for ESSA advocacy in your state and community. As always, thanks for everything you do to make our country inclusive of all learners!

Mimi Corcoran
President & CEO, National Center for Learning Disabilities
ESSA Advocacy Toolkit

The nation’s new federal education law gives you a unique opportunity to weigh in on the education plans of your state and school district. This easy-to-use guide can help you make a real difference for your child and for other kids with learning and attention issues during this process.

In this toolkit you’ll find information on:

- How the Every Student Succeeds Act works
- Why accountability is so important for kids with disabilities
- Indicators that measure school and student achievement
- The importance of state and local report cards and ratings
- Interventions that support struggling schools
- Accommodations for high school tests

You’ll also find a variety of printable downloads that make it easy to advocate at the local and state levels. Being involved in ESSA helps you make sure your child isn’t overlooked.
Making Sure Your Child Is Counted

As a parent of a child with learning and attention issues, you want your child to count in the education system. And you want his school to be held accountable for how he’s doing.

ESSA gives states the authority to decide how to hold their schools accountable. But the law also requires them to give parents the chance to weigh in. This is a vital aspect of ESSA. Without parent involvement, kids with disabilities risk being overlooked.

There are different ways to get involved. For instance, your state might provide a number of opportunities for parents to participate.

These may include:

- Working groups
- Public meetings
- Listening sessions

Your contact isn’t limited to public meetings, however. You can reach out directly to state or local education officials and request an in-person meeting or conference call. Or you can simply send a letter or email.

You can also write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.

This toolkit can help you have an impact on your state’s and school district’s education plan—and make sure your school considers your child’s needs.

It includes:

- Information on the law
- Questions to ask your local education officials
- Questions to ask your state education officials

Plus, it provides simple tools for making your concerns known and your voice heard!
What ESSA Is

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is the primary K–12 education law in the U.S. It was enacted in 2015, and it covers every public school in the country. The law will be in effect beginning in the 2017–2018 school year, and states are now planning for this change.

ESSA replaces the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). ESSA’s stated goal is to “provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps.”

Under ESSA, states will have more power to determine what education looks like in their schools, while still following a federal framework. Each state must develop an education plan to present to the U.S. Department of Education by either April or September, 2017. The plan must include a description of the following:

- Academic standards
- Annual testing
- How schools will be held responsible for student achievement
- Goals for academic achievement
- Plans for supporting and improving struggling schools

States and school districts must also develop report cards to inform the public about how their schools are doing in general, as well as how certain groups of students are faring. One of those groups is kids with disabilities, which includes many kids with learning and attention issues.

States must write a separate plan focused on special education to meet the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
What States Must Do Under ESSA

ESSA covers many different programs. Here’s a quick look at what the law requires states to do:

- Focus on improving student achievement.
- Meaningfully engage with parents as states develop and carry out new educational plans.
- Choose standards for college and career readiness.
- Have annual testing in grades 3–8, and once in high school. States may choose the test they use. The law also encourages them to eliminate any unnecessary testing so teachers can spend more time teaching.
- Come up with a system of accountability.
- Identify and implement interventions and supports for schools that are struggling.
- Be transparent about how students with disabilities, English language learners, students with low-income backgrounds and students who are members of major racial/ethnic groups are faring in a school, school district and state.

ESSA also includes funding for many other programs. Here are some of the opportunities:

- Improved literacy instruction through a voluntary state grant program
- Student supports within schools, which might include things like counseling, technology and personalized learning
- Well-rounded education, such as college and career counseling, STEM, arts, civics and access to AP/IB programs
- Promotion of safety and health among students
Accountability is the formal name for how ESSA holds schools responsible for student achievement. It's the way states tell parents and the public about how students are faring. It's also the way they explain how they'll work to improve struggling schools—or help groups of students who are struggling.

Holding schools accountable for how students with disabilities are doing in school can result in positive changes. Research has shown that teachers get more training in how to work with kids with disabilities. And students are less likely to be in classrooms that only have kids with disabilities.

ESSA requires states to build a system of accountability that includes:

- **Setting the indicators** that measure student and school achievement
- **Reporting to the public** about whether students are meeting target goals for each indicator
- **Identifying and supporting schools** where students are struggling

Schools are specifically accountable for how kids with disabilities, including learning disabilities, perform. So the indicators your state sets, and how it identifies and supports schools where students struggle, may have a big impact on your child.
ESSA gives you a unique chance to influence how your state holds schools accountable. The law requires states to include parents in that process in two key areas:

**State and Local Plans:**
Parents can weigh in on how their state and school district will deal with goals for achievement, accountability, and the response when students are struggling.

**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.

There are a number of ways to be heard at both the state and local level. You can:

- Attend working groups, public meetings or listening sessions offered by your state. (Check your state department of education website for opportunities.)
- Contact your state officials (at your state department of education, governor’s office or state board of education) and local officials (at your district board of education or your superintendent’s office). You can meet with, call, write or email them.
- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.

It can also help to join with other parents who are interested in improving schools in your area. You can share your concerns and ask questions together.

**Key Takeaways:**

- ESSA requires state and local policymakers to meaningfully engage with parents in the development and implementation of the law.
- Now is the time to get involved and ask your state and local policymakers how you can be part of the process.
State and Local Report Cards

ESSA requires every state and school district to publish an annual “report card” that’s easy to access and understand.

These report cards give the public important information about how schools are doing. The report card must include:

• Details of the state accountability system, including reporting on schools that are struggling.

• Information about how all students, and specific groups of students, are doing on the state’s accountability indicators. One of those groups is students with disabilities.

• Percentage of students who participate/don’t participate in the state tests, broken out by student group.

• Number and percentage of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who take the alternate assessment.

• Data on key areas like access to advanced coursework, discipline rates and chronic absenteeism, broken out by student group.

• Professional qualifications of educators. That includes the number of inexperienced teachers and principals, out-of-field teachers, and teachers with emergency credentials.

• Per-pupil spending for federal, state and local funds for each school district and school.

Learn more about state and school report cards.

Key Takeaways:

• ESSA requires states and school districts to create report cards that give the public information about school performance.

• Information on state and school report cards can be used to target school improvements.
Accountability Indicators for Measuring Performance

It’s important to know how well students and schools are performing because it helps identify areas of struggle and success. ESSA requires states to include the following accountability indicators to hold schools responsible:

- Academic achievement
- Academic progress
- High school graduation rates
- English language proficiency
- Additional indicator(s) of school quality or student success

ESSA doesn’t tell states exactly what this additional indicator should be—each state will decide. But the law requires them to come up with an indicator that can show real differences between schools, and that meets technical requirements. In making this decision, states are required to consult with parents. Some examples of additional indicators include:

- Chronic absenteeism
- Discipline rates
- Measures of post–high school readiness

States and school districts must report on how all students (and groups of students) are performing in each indicator. That way, parents, educators and policymakers can see where students may be struggling and excelling. With this information, they can make good decisions about how to help students and schools succeed.

Learn more about accountability indicators.

Key Takeaways:

- Accountability indicators lay out how school performance will be measured.
- ESSA tells states what most of these indicators should be, such as academic achievement. But it requires states to come up with one or more additional indicators of school quality or student success.
- ESSA requires states to work with parents in developing accountability indicators.
A school rating allows parents to easily know how schools are performing. ESSA creates a basic framework for what should be included in each school rating.

This framework is based on how schools perform on each of their accountability indicators. To communicate a school’s rating, states might use labels (“excellent” or “needs improvement”), letter grades (A–F) or number scales (1–10).

How school ratings are designed is important. Having an overall rating gives parents a quick idea of how well that school is doing. But it can mask the performance of groups of students who may be behind if a state creates a school rating system that doesn’t focus on their achievement.

The best way to let parents know how a school is performing is to share both an overall rating and information about how student groups are performing on each of the indicators. This way parents have all the information they need.

Learn more about school ratings.

Key Takeaway:

- School ratings, together with information about how students are doing on each accountability indicator, give parents useful information that’s easy to understand.
Interventions to Support Low-Performing Schools

ESSA requires states to identify schools that are struggling. The law provides support for two categories of schools:

- **“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

Reporting on these schools isn’t enough, however. Under ESSA, states and school districts must present specific plans for improving them.

This is especially important for students with disabilities. Schools that seem like they’re doing well overall may still have students with disabilities who are struggling. These schools should be identified for targeted support.

ESSA requires states to figure out how they will identify which schools and groups of students need help. To do this, states will create their own policies for how long to wait before recognizing that students are struggling. They’ll also set policies for how quickly to provide comprehensive and targeted support and interventions.

It’s important for states to have policies that quickly recognize when students and schools are struggling so children and teachers can get the help they need.

After a school is identified for support, they’ll create a plan to improve. These plans must be developed with parents and other stakeholders. ESSA requires interventions to be evidence-based.

**Key Takeaways:**

- ESSA requires states and school districts to identify and support schools that need comprehensive support, and schools that need targeted support.

- It’s important for states and school districts to act quickly to identify any school where groups of students—like students with disabilities—are struggling. That’s true even if it seems that the school is doing well, on average.

- ESSA requires that interventions to support schools and students be evidence-based.
Accommodations on High School Tests

Under NCLB, states used their own high school test, and school districts had to use that same test. But in recent years, many states have chosen to use the SAT, ACT or another nationally recognized assessment as their high school test.

ESSA allows states to continue this. It also allows school districts to use these tests, even if their statewide test is different.

This can reduce the number of tests high school students have to take. Students with disabilities have historically had a hard time getting accommodations on the SAT or ACT, however. Without accommodations, students can’t accurately show their knowledge and skill.

If a state or school district chooses to use an assessment like the SAT or ACT instead of its own, that test must:

- Align to the state’s standards for content knowledge
- Provide high-quality data on student achievement
- Be sound, valid and reliable

If an entire state wants to use one of these tests, the U.S. Department of Education must approve it. A school district that wants to use one of these tests must get approval from the state. And it must notify parents before, during and after the state’s approval process.

Learn more about accommodations on new high school tests.

Key Takeaways:

- Many states have started to use the SAT or ACT as their high school test. ESSA gives school districts the option to use these tests even if they’re not used across the whole state.
- Historically, students with disabilities have found it challenging to receive accommodations on the SAT and ACT.
- Any test a state or school district uses must give students with disabilities the accommodations they need.
Decades ago, people thought kids with learning and attention issues were unable to learn. We’ve come a long way in making sure these students get the help they need.

We know they’re as smart as their peers and can succeed in school with the right support. In fact, most students in special education spend the majority of their day in general education classrooms, learning alongside their peers.

ESSA holds states accountable for how well students with disabilities are doing. It keeps schools focused on closing achievement gaps. And by requiring that states and districts involve parents in the process, ESSA lets you make sure your child is being counted!
It can seem like a lot of work to be an advocate at a higher level than just your child’s school. But you can do it in increments, as your time allows.

### Goals

Start by listing your advocacy goals. **Your list might look like this:**

- Identify three to five other parents who are interested in learning more about ESSA.
- Introduce myself to my state/local education officials.
- Meet with my state/local officials and plan to follow up.

### Actions

Then, fill out the action steps you’ll take to achieve those goals. (You can set deadlines for yourself, too). **Your steps might look like this:**

- Visit the ESSA-related website for my state.
- Get contact information for state and local officials working on ESSA.
- Research the topics I’m most interested in.
- Get contact information for other interested parents.
- Organize a parent group to participate in ESSA planning.
- Request an in-person meeting with my state or local official.
- Arrange a conference call with my state or local official.
- Send an email or letter to my state or local official.
- Request to be part of a state ESSA workgroup.
- Attend and participate in a state-led public meeting.
# ESSA Participation Plan

## Goals

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## Actions

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ESSA Contact Sheet

Being an advocate is a commitment, no matter how involved you are. Having all your contact information in one place makes it easier to reach out to people when you need to.

For contact information for state officials working on ESSA, look on your state department of education’s website, or call the department’s main number. For information on your district officials, visit the websites of your school district and local school board.

### ESSA Contact Info

#### State officials working on ESSA:

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Scripts for Talking With State and Local Education Officials

When talking to your education officials, it’s important to be clear about the issue that is important to you. You want to leave the conversation with answers to your questions and know how to follow up. One way to do that is to make a statement and then immediately follow it with a question. Here are some examples you can use:

- It’s important to me that the indicator of school quality and student success measures something that impacts my child, such as discipline. What indicator are you planning to use?

- I’m worried that my child and other kids with disabilities will be overlooked in our state education system. How will you be reporting on my child’s performance? And how will you support interventions if he and others with disabilities struggle?

You can find other ideas in the leave-behinds for state and local officials provided in this toolkit.
Dear [recipient name]:

I am the parent of [a child/children] with [a learning disability, ADHD, etc.]. I'm writing to find out how I can be more involved in efforts to carry out the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Every child deserves the chance to get an excellent education, and I’m excited that ESSA gives us all an opportunity to think about how to make that happen.

ESSA requires states and schools to give parents a way to participate. But I’m not sure whom to speak with or how to get involved. I hope you can help.

I’d like to be involved in how our state and school will be handling accountability. It’s important that schools be held responsible for the achievement of all students. Supporting our schools starts with knowing exactly how students are doing and where teachers need help.

As the parent of [a child/children] with [a learning disability, ADHD, etc.], I know how important it is to work with educators to help students succeed. I look forward to hearing from you about how I can be involved in the ESSA process.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]
ESSA provides an opportunity to increase the achievement of students with learning disabilities and ADHD. To support children like my own, our school district must address five areas:

1. **Involve parents of students with disabilities in process to create and carry out the school district ESSA plan.**
   
   **Key questions:** ESSA requires states to involve parents in the process of developing school district education plans. They also have to involve parents in the school improvement process. How is our district engaging parents of kids with disabilities in that plan? What opportunities exist for parents to become more involved?

   **Why it’s important:** Parents are a diverse group, and our kids have a range of needs. It’s important for the state to engage with a broad group of parents. Kids with disabilities have different challenges. So it’s not enough to have one parent representing all of them.

2. **Support diverse learners by including multi-tier systems of supports and Universal Design for Learning in all schools.**
   
   **Key question:** Every district is required to develop a program of instruction that meets the needs of all students. How will our district’s program of instruction meet the needs of students with learning and attention issues?

   **Why it’s important:** Our district is required to meet student needs. To address the needs of diverse learners, the program should have aspects of Universal Design for Learning and multi-tier systems of supports to identify and address areas of struggle early.

3. **Quickly support struggling students with targeted, evidence-based interventions.**
   
   **Key question:** What process will our district use to quickly recognize and support schools and groups of students that are struggling? That includes schools that are identified as “consistently underperforming” and those in need of targeted support and interventions.

   **Why it’s important:** Students and schools that are struggling need quick and targeted support to improve. School districts need to have a process in place to make that happen. That process should identify why students are struggling and which evidence-based interventions might help.

4. **Support students at risk for failure and involve parents in the school improvement process.**
   
   **Key question:** How will our school district’s plan help students who are at risk for academic failure? And what opportunities exist for parents to be involved in school improvement?

   **Why it’s important:** Every district must show how schools will identify students who are at risk for failure, and steps schools will take to help those students. The plan must create a process to investigate why students are struggling, called the “needs assessment process.” Districts need to identify evidence-based interventions to address those areas.

5. **Provide accommodations on new high school tests.**
   
   **Key question:** How will the school district make sure kids with disabilities get accommodations on new high school tests?

   **Why it’s important:** Students with disabilities must be able to fully participate in any tests. That is especially important if our district decides to use the SAT or ACT as its high school test.
ESSA provides an opportunity to increase the achievement of students with learning disabilities and ADHD. To support children like my own, our state must address these six areas:

1. **Involve parents of children with disabilities in the process to create and carry out the state’s ESSA plan.**
   - **Key questions:** ESSA requires states to engage parents in the process of developing state education plans. How is our state involving parents of kids with disabilities? What opportunities exist for parents to become more involved?
   - **Why it’s important:** Parents are a diverse group, and our children have a range of needs. It’s important for the state to engage with a broad group of parents. Kids with disabilities have different challenges. So it’s not enough to have one parent representing all of them.

2. **Make sure students with disabilities count in school accountability.**
   - **Key question:** States are required to include certain “student groups” in their accountability systems and report on how they’re doing. That includes kids with disabilities. How is our state making sure that students with disabilities are included?
   - **Why it’s important:** Accounting for our kids provides parents with vital information. It gives them a way to measure how well schools are serving those students and whether schools need supports and interventions. But states decide how many students are needed to make up a group. Our state needs to set a low number so students with disabilities can be counted. The number that’s often considered appropriate is 10. It strikes a balance between ordering student privacy and including as many students as possible.

3. **Create clear school ratings together with an indicator dashboard.**
   - **Key question:** How will our state provide school ratings while also showing how the school and student groups are doing on key indicators?
   - **Why it’s important:** There are two ways to show school performance: with an overall rating and with a “dashboard” that looks at different components. (One component is how student groups perform on key indicators.) Using both helps parents and the community understand how schools are doing, and where improvements need to be made.

4. **Make academic achievement matter most in school accountability.**
   - **Key question:** How will our state make sure all the school accountability indicators are linked to supporting academic achievement?
   - **Why it’s important:** A school’s rating should include five different measures. These include test scores and student growth on state assessments, graduation rates, and at least one other measure of school quality and student success. All of these should be tied to improving outcomes for students. That’s especially true to help students who are farthest behind.

5. **Select a school quality/student success indicator that supports students with disabilities.**
   - **Key question:** ESSA asks states to select an additional measure of school quality and/or student success. How will our state consider the needs of students with disabilities as it selects this added indicator?
   - **Why it’s important:** The additional indicator must be meaningful, support academic achievement, and have no unintended consequences for students with disabilities. This is exciting because it means states will have a chance to focus on areas beyond test scores. Our state needs to consider how it will link this information to a rise in achievement. This is important for groups of students that have historically been overlooked, including students with disabilities.

6. **Quickly recognize when students and schools are struggling, and provide targeted support and interventions.**
   - **Key question:** Students and schools that are struggling need quick and targeted help and support to improve. Will our state have a strong definition of “consistent underperformance” so student groups that struggle are identified quickly?
   - **Why it’s important:** A strong definition would help to identify schools where groups of students have been doing poorly for two years. The state could then outline a process for schools to engage with parents, come up with evidence-based interventions and get funding to support its plan.