

The Transition to ESSA: State and District Approaches to Implementing Title I and Title II-A in 2017-18

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When the primary federal law governing K-12 schooling was updated in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), it shifted many decisions to states and districts. However, through two of its core programs (Title I and Title II-A), ESSA retained federal requirements for states to set challenging content standards, assess student performance, identify and support low-performing schools, and promote the development of the educator workforce. Title I encourages equal access to education by funding districts and schools serving a high percentage of students from low-income families. Title II-A aims to improve the effectiveness of teachers and principals. How states and districts respond to the combination of flexibility and requirements will determine whether ESSA stimulates educational improvement as intended.

This report is part of a study describing the implementation of Title I and Title II-A at key timepoints, through surveys of all states and a nationally representative sample of districts. The report compares the actions of states and districts from the 2013-14 school year (prior to ESSA) to the 2017-18 school year (during the transition to ESSA). A future report will examine implementation in the 2021-22 school year, after districts have had more time to implement any state policy changes.

Key Findings

- Most states had not significantly changed their content standards by 2017-18, and districts increasingly provided supports to implement them.** By 2013, all but four states had adopted the Common Core State Standards, college- and career-ready standards developed by a multistate collaborative. More districts reported assisting implementation of state standards in 2018 than in 2014. For example, 82 percent of districts developed a district curriculum in 2018, compared to 74 percent in 2014, and 94 percent used textbooks that aligned with state content standards in 2018, compared to 80 percent in 2014 (see exhibit).

- States broadened the measures they used to identify struggling schools; more districts reported specific improvement activities at these schools.** Between 2014 and 2018, 14 more states held schools accountable for students' attendance, 20 more for achievement growth, and 9 more for test scores in subjects beyond reading and math. Districts increasingly reported that their struggling schools implemented improvement strategies. In 2018, for example, 93 percent of districts provided professional development (PD) to teachers on using student data and on working in teams to improve instruction. In 2014, 68 percent of districts provided PD on student data and 61 percent on working in teams (see exhibit).

- States and districts increasingly used performance data as a means to support effective teaching.** Between 2014 and 2018, nine more states used measures of teacher performance, such as the teachers' evaluation ratings or their students' achievement growth, to assess whether students have equitable access to high-quality teaching. Districts increasingly used teachers' evaluation results to identify and support low performers. In 2018, for example, 97 percent of districts used evaluation results to develop improvement plans; 95 percent used them to identify low-performing teachers for individualized PD that included coaching, mentoring, or peer assistance. In 2014, 86 percent of districts used the results for improvement plans and 84 percent for individualized PD (see exhibit).

