

Leveraging the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to Build Professional Learning Systems

There is consensus that we need to expect more from the investment in professional learning, and there is a growing body of evidence and experience about what to work *toward* to get results. It begins with states and districts cultivating a learning culture, uncompromising in its focus on effective teaching, leadership, and student outcomes. In a learning culture, mindsets, structures, and practice align to improve individual and institutional practice. The evidence base identifies a number of conditions that develop and nurture a learning culture and school, district, and statewide learning systems:

- **Shared Vision.** School systems that prioritize continuous learning as part of the daily work of schools see improved results for students ([Jensen, 2016](#)). Redesigning professional learning systems begins with a vision of teams of teachers learning and problem solving together for several hours per week during the school day focused on ensuring all students achieve career and college ready standards. Well-prepared and supported team leader, possibly a coach or other teacher leader guides these teams through the learning cycle process. Professional learning standards applied widely ensure that individual, team, school-based, and system level learning is high quality and tied to outcomes for educators and students. All teachers experience standards-based professional learning while engaged in individual, team, school, and system wide professional learning. Achieving the vision requires changes to roles and responsibilities for individuals, schools, districts, and states.
- **Data-Driven Goal Setting and Evaluation.** Critical to the continuous improvement cycle is data on student and teacher performance regarding standards students are required to master. Individual, team, and school wide goal setting and evaluation occur most effectively when educators have information that enables them to identify learning gaps for both their students and themselves. States and districts are increasingly looking for opportunities to connect professional learning to valid measures of impact and to use student learning data as the key driver in setting professional learning agendas. Teacher evaluation is best integrated into the continuous improvement process, providing educators with immediate feedback as well as formative data that provide information on the quality and impact of their instruction on their goals and those for their students. (Jensen, 2016)
- **Developing Leadership.** Building learning systems in schools and districts requires a focus on leadership. Principal leadership is second only to teaching in affecting school performance and requires attention to recruitment, preparation, evaluation, and ongoing support (Mana, 2015). In top-performing systems, leaders receive sustained, intensive support, experiencing the strategies and practices that they will then facilitate themselves ([Jensen, 2016](#); [The Wallace Foundation](#)). District, school, and teacher leaders must participate in their own professional learning and have the knowledge and skills to create a culture of professional learning ([Leithwood, 2013](#); [Spillane and Diamond, 2004](#)). Performance standards detail the knowledge and skills expected of principal and teacher leaders, and career pathways provide the vision and incentives for more teachers to aspire and prepare for such opportunities.

- **Alignment of Resources.** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires [prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating resources](#) (including time, dollars, and personnel) for educator learning. High-quality systems [study the extent of spending on professional growth](#), use data to reflect on the impact of these assessments, and then align resources (to the extent allowed by policy and regulations) to their vision and priorities (Education Resource Strategies). Cutting-edge strategies to support systems can be found in OECD's 2011 report, [Strong performers and successful reformers in education: Lessons from PISA for the United States](#).
- **Sustaining Implementation through Change Management.** Those responsible for professional learning must apply findings from change process research to support long-term implementation. Constructive feedback and reflection support continuous improvement in practice that allows educators to move along a continuum from novice to expert through application of their professional learning (Hall & Hord, 2014). Systems sustain learning through meaningful opportunities for practice and follow-up support provided by coaches and peers ([Joyce & Showers, 2002](#); [Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Mikami, & Lun, 2011](#)). School and district leaders have additional responsibilities for ensuring alignment and coherence and reducing fragmentation of efforts.

This document provides an analysis of opportunities in ESSA for states to assist their organization and their school systems to build and strengthen such learning systems.

Learning System Element: Vision for Professional Learning

Opportunity	Relevant ESSA Provision	"So What?" (Potential Opportunities and Risks)	Possible State & Local Next Steps
<p>Definition of Professional Development</p>	<p>The definition of professional development has been revised to ensure that professional development activities are "sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused."</p> <p>The definition emphasizes that PD is "an integral part of school and local educational agency strategies for providing educators... with the knowledge and skills necessary to enable students to succeed in a well-rounded education and to meet the challenging State academic standards"</p>	<p>The definition continues NCLB's restrictions against using Title II funds for one-time PD activities and creates an opportunity to improve the vision for school and LEA professional learning activities funded through Title II by adding "collaborative," "job-embedded," "data-driven" and "classroom-focused" to the definition.</p> <p>The definition begins by recognizing that PD is a strategy directed at preparing teachers to enable students to meet challenging academic standards.</p> <p>While this is the most important purpose of professional learning, there remains concern that under the number of broad allowable uses, funds could continue to be used on programs that do meet the new definition as well as the standard for success.</p> <p>Similarly, districts may use Title II professional development funds, and other state and local funds, for allowable but ineffective uses such as coaching by under-prepared and under-supported educators.</p>	<p><u>State Actions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage key stakeholders to establish or strengthen a shared vision of the learning systems, down to the school level, that leverage and meet the new definition. • Disseminate your state's vision for professional learning, in alignment with the definition. (As a supplement, consider framing the vision from a teacher and/or school leader perspective.) • Provide LEAs with examples (and non-examples) of investments aligned with the new definition of professional definition. • If your state has adopted the Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning, show LEAs how the revised definition better aligns with the Standards. • Adopt professional learning standards as a key driver for quality practice. • Ask LEAs how their strategy and investments will shift given the new definition. • Provide guidance to LEAs on how the acceptable uses can be employed to support the new definition. • Conduct analyses of current investments and policies to check alignment with definition.

Opportunity	Relevant ESSA Provision	"So What?" (Potential Opportunities and Risks)	Possible State & Local Next Steps
<p>State and Local Plans</p>	<p>Title II will ultimately require all states and districts to generate new plans/applications and reports for how they will use Title II funds (and align state and local funds) to advance teacher and leader quality.</p> <p>ESSA stipulates that LEAs "shall submit an application to the State educational agency at such time, in such manner, and containing such information as the State educational agency may reasonably require."</p>	<p>Position Title II planning requirement as an opportunity to articulate a vision for professional learning that is focused on ensuring students meet academic standards by building teacher capacity through ongoing cycles of continuous learning and problem solving.</p> <p>Include questions that focus LEAS on issues of professional learning vision, standards of quality, data for decision making and assessing impact, leadership development, alignment of resources, and implementation.</p> <p>USED (in collaboration with field) has authority to establish requirements and expectations for that process, particularly including what will be included (or not included) in the "consolidated" application and reporting processes that are permitted under the Act.</p> <p>While Title II has left decisions regarding teacher evaluation to the states, states continue to have a responsibility to consider how they will leverage their previous work to ensure high quality teaching for all students. This is opportunity to pivot policy from focus on measurement to one of improvement.</p>	<p><u>State Actions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish stakeholder group to contribute to vision for professional learning for educators and the system to support attaining it. • Educate stakeholders on effective professional learning (using the new federal definition and state standards for professional learning). • Develop a strategy for working toward your vision by reviewing state data and determining SEA priorities, identifying which state priorities require attention by LEAs, and articulating this strategy in your plan. • Develop a consolidated LEA plan template that promotes careful attention to the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Vision, standards, and definition ○ Data analysis and impact measures ○ State priorities ○ Teacher and principal evaluation and feedback systems ○ Resource alignment ○ Implementation and change management • Explain how LEAs meet new evidence standards. • Signal shift • Identify strategies for SEA and LEAs to assess quality and impact of professional learning. • Provide guidance, flexibility, and incentives to LEAs for consolidating and aligning spending to the vision and priorities and overcoming typical barriers including time and expertise. • Consider options for assisting LEAs with their planning process. • Consider processes (e.g. peer review, consultative protocols) for giving districts feedback on their plans.

Learning System Element: Ongoing Assessment & Evaluation with Data

Opportunity	Relevant ESSA Provision	"So What?" (Potential Opportunities and Risks)	Possible State & Local Next Steps
State Plans	States may be required to describe how they will use data to "continually update and improve the activities" supported by Title II.	This presents an opportunity for states to establish or reflect on measures of impact for each of their Title II investments. States may also make the same requirement of LEA plans, given that states can stipulate whatever information they reasonably need in the plans.	<p><u>State Actions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish plan for collecting, assessing, and reporting impact of Title II (and other) investments. • Model the process of identifying measures and tracking the impact of investments for LEAs. • Use state set-aside dollars to support pilots of communities of practice that develop formative and summative assessments to document impact of professional development investments. • Engage stakeholder group in analysis of the data.
Reporting Requirements	Under ESSA, states must submit annual reports to the Secretary and public that describe how the state is using its funds and how those activities are improving educator effectiveness, in addition to the annual retention rates of effective and ineffective educators (if available). There are other requirements if funds are used for equity or evaluation. Districts are also required to report this information to the state, and publicly post their report. States may require other information in the report as well.	<p>Reports are typically viewed as a compliance and monitoring strategy, but states can establish a process for LEAs that focuses on continuous improvement.</p> <p>The report may be an important opportunity for districts to revisit their measures of impact, evaluate the success of their Title II investments, and re-calibrate their strategy to better support teacher and leader effectiveness and increased student learning.</p> <p>States can use this "assurance" requirement to leverage a more powerful monitoring and reflection process.</p>	<p><u>State Actions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss with stakeholders how you might transform the reporting requirement into a meaningful reflective activity for the SEA and LEAs (e.g., by asking for evidence of impact for their investments in their plan, they will be able to return to these measures in their reflective report). • Develop a report template and process that guides LEAs through a reflective process and encourages them to consider how they will adapt their strategy based on data and feedback. • Establish partner LEAs for providing ongoing feedback and support. • Identify and report data of leading indicators related to quality of professional learning, professional capital, and leadership support. (See TALIS survey.) • Determine timing for plans and reporting. • Consider the SEA's capacity for audit or review, and select a timeline that will allow districts to meaningfully reflect on their strategy and its impact.

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Accountability	Under Title I, statewide accountability systems must include at least one additional indicator (and can include multiple such indicators) that measure school quality, in addition to academic indicators.	<p>Teaching quality and improvement are key leading indicators for increased student learning.</p> <p>Leadership is second only to quality teaching in impacting student achievement.</p> <p>Learning Forward has evidence that those schools which improve on the Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) that measures quality of professional learning have greater learning gains than schools that do not improve on the SAI tool.</p> <p>While not federally required, states may consider data dashboards that report on measures of all three of the above as part of the theory of change for achieving student performance outcomes.</p>	<p><u>State Actions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider supporting a dashboard system for LEAs that addresses measures of student growth, educator effectiveness, leadership, and professional learning. SEA and LEAs may benefit from examining <i>What the World's Highest Performers Do?</i> (OECD) and other related reports for guidance on appropriate input indicators to monitor. Establish theory of action, leading indicators, and change management plans for attaining performance outcomes for students.

Learning System Element: Developing Leadership

Opportunity	Relevant ESSA Provision	"So What?" (Potential Opportunities and Risks)	Possible State & Local Next Steps
New 3% Set-Aside for School Leaders	In addition to the state set-aside within Title II, states may now reserve up to 3 percent of LEAs' allocation to support school leaders. Allowable uses include reforming licensure and certification, building instructional leadership, establishing leader evaluation systems, supporting alternative certification programs, improving recruitment and retention of school leaders, providing technical assistance to	<p>This set-aside provides additional funds to states (beyond their 5% allocation of Title II) to strengthen school leadership. The uses are broad, allowing states to use this funding flexibly in alignment with their vision for professional learning and college and career-ready instruction.</p> <p>Particularly for states whose Title II allocation will decrease as a result of the formula change beginning in FY17, states may need to make a compelling case for why taking advantage of the 3% set aside will provide efficiencies and value to districts.</p>	<p><u>State Actions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage statewide advisory team (such as superintendents, influential school leaders) in determining the highest needs for the 3% as aligned to the statewide vision. These individuals are critical to "selling" the decision. Draft compelling messaging to explain your plans for these funds and how they will add value to all LEAs in advancing professional and student learning. Ensure stakeholders have authentic opportunity to weigh in on options for uses of funding. Create a feedback mechanism to gauge LEA satisfaction with programs enabled by the 3% set

	<p>LEAs around principal development, reforming principal preparation, establishing leader academies, and training principals on blended learning, early childhood, STEM, and CTE.</p>	<p>States are justified in using these funds to initiate and/or complete work on its work force agenda. Accordingly states should review their status of completion toward establishing/redefining and implementing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Licensure and relicensure systems • Career pathways • Performance standards and implementation guidance • Recruitment and preparation • Evaluation and ongoing development cycles • Statewide program and policy alignment 	<p>aside.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure these investments are part of a coherent aligned vision for professional learning as opposed to an opportunity to fund a new program. • Conduct program and policy reviews to identify gaps, redundancies, and fragmentation.
<p>Teacher and School Leader Incentive Fund (National Activities)</p>	<p>ESSA's Title II National Activities section authorizes funds for the Teacher and School Leader Incentive Fund – revising an existing competitive grant program focused on designing and implementing human capital management systems, which specifically includes professional development under the law, in addition to educator and leader evaluation.</p>	<p>This fairly well-funded grant fund creates opportunities and additional resources for state and district grantees to rethink human capital management systems for teachers and leaders.</p> <p>High-quality professional learning should be a component of this work, including aligning professional learning to educator performance standards.</p> <p>Applicants must describe how they will evaluate teachers and school leaders using measures of student academic achievement, so states and districts without these systems may not be eligible.</p>	<p><u>State Actions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider whether this competitive grant may provide additional resources to support your state's vision for professional learning (see above). • Encourage leading districts to apply for competitive funds. • If appropriate, provide feedback on district applications. • Disseminate lessons learned from participating districts. • Support a community of practice among those systems awarded this funding to support amplifying and scaling lessons learned.

Learning System Element: Aligned Resources

Opportunity	Relevant ESSA Provision	"So What?" (Potential Opportunities and Risks)	Possible State & Local Next Steps
<p>School Improvement Funds</p>	<p>Title I requires states to set aside 7% of Title I for school improvement activities for the bottom 5% of schools in the state and for consistently underperforming schools (roughly \$1 billion across all 50 states). These funds help support school improvement activities in those schools, as determined by the school, district, and state – depending on the severity of the underperformance.</p> <p>The Department is prohibited from regulating on specific school improvement activities, among other restrictions in this area, but states and districts must include evidence-based strategies.</p>	<p>School improvement funds present opportunities to advance professional learning within low-performing schools and their districts.</p> <p>Additionally, each school must conduct a needs analysis, and in some cases a resource equity analysis, which could be leveraged to identify and improve professional learning issues in these schools.</p>	<p><u>State Actions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signal and monitor for how professional learning will be improved in low-performing schools, as part of expectations around Title I or consolidated plans. • Provide directions for a needs assessment that is data driven and focuses on what students and educators need to learn most. • Provide school improvement planning template that embeds needs assessment with other critical components outlined in LEA application. • Provide guidance and technical assistance on developing a learning strategy that aligns with evidence-based professional learning (based on the new definition of evidence-based). • Emphasize monitoring and reflection processes. • Connect schools in networks or communities of practice to build collective responsibility and shared accountability. • Establish routines to recognize, elevate, and amplify the most successful work of LEAs and schools
<p>Equitable Distribution of Teachers</p>	<p>Title II's goals and allowable uses now explicitly include efforts to "provide low-income and minority students greater access to effective teachers, principals, and other school leaders." The funding formula for Title II also weights poverty more heavily, and this weight will increase each year through 2023.</p> <p>Title I of ESSA requires states to</p>	<p>Hiring or firing practices alone will not lead to equitable access to effective teaching. Professional learning that leads to improvement in practice is needed, particularly in areas where inequitable distribution persists. The state's theory of action for professional learning may specifically call out the important role of this work to improving access to quality teaching for all students.</p>	<p><u>State Actions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signal the importance of professional learning to improving equitable distribution through guidance on local plans. • Provide LEAs with examples of professional learning strategies that improve equity (e.g., developing communities of practice for less experienced teachers, facilitated by highly effective, trained peers). • Educate districts with higher levels of poverty about the increased funding they

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	include in their state plans "how low-income and minority children enrolled in schools assisted under this part are not served at disproportionate rates by ineffective, out-of-field, or inexperienced teachers". States must also report on the distribution of these teachers on state report cards under Title I.	States may reconsider requirements on teacher assignments and evaluations that act as barriers to teacher collaboration and collective responsibility. There are strong teachers in most schools but no incentive or expectation for them to help other teachers get better. This may be a powerful strategy for accelerating student access to great teaching every day.	will likely receive between 2017 – 2023 and encourage them to rethink professional learning to improve access to quality teaching. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider targeting leadership development investments in districts with the greatest need, for the purpose of developing teaching and leadership.
5% State Set-Aside of Title II Funds	ESSA permits states to set aside up to 5% of Title II funds for state level activities (only 1% of which may be administrative). The allowable uses of funds for these state level activities are broad.	States could potentially use this 5% of Title II funds to work on improving professional learning systems and implementing their own state standards for effective professional learning. However, because the funds are broad, states may need guidance or encouragement to focus these funds on high quality professional learning.	<u>State Actions:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage stakeholders in plan development. Commit to vision, standards, and definition. Conduct state policy and program analysis to determine needs, reduce fragmentation and redundancies, and eliminate ineffective programs and waste. Revisit goals, theory of action, and measurements. Establish priorities and long-term strategies for SEA and LEAs (where is SEA action needed most). Align SEA roles, responsibilities, and funding. Write new state plan.
Title IV/21st Century Schools	Recipients of 21 st Century Learning Centers funding under Title IV may use funds for Expanded Learning Time, which includes additional time for "instructional and support staff to collaborate, plan, and engage in professional development (including professional development on family and community engagement) within and across grades and subjects."	Given this definition of Expanded Learning Time, funds from 21 st Century CLC could be used to provide time for professional learning within and beyond the school day, if a state or district chooses to implement expanded learning time as part of its grant.	<u>State Actions:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educate districts and/or provide guidance to districts about this potential use of funds. Elevate and amplify ways to create as well as effectively use time as a result of this funding. Promote use of consolidated LEA plan to align Title IV with Title II. In absence, promote alignment through communication and advocacy roles.

Learning System Element: Sustaining Implementation through Change Management

Opportunity	Relevant ESSA Provision	"So What?" (Potential Opportunities and Risks)	Possible State & Local Next Steps
Stakeholder Engagement Process	ESSA requires states and districts to engage in "consultation," a process where teachers, principals, paraprofessionals, specialized instructional support personnel, charter school leaders, parents, community partners, and other organizations are asked to inform the state's Title applications and/or consolidated plans. In Title II specifically, these stakeholders should be asked how the state or district might improve their plan to better meet the purpose of the title (increasing student achievement, improving the effectiveness of educators, increasing the number of effective educators, and improving access to effective educators).	The consultation process provides an opportunity for SEAs and LEAs to engage early with key stakeholders. These groups might provide insight not only on the current state of professional learning and its root causes, but also identify key barriers to navigate and essential supports. If facilitated thoughtfully, this process may also yield critical public champions of the state's plan.	<p><u>State Actions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage stakeholders early in the development of your plan(s). Use current state vision, standards and new definition as basis for feedback, as opposed to "open ended" conversations. Ask stakeholders to explain how they currently experience the system, and what is needed to improve practice. • Consider how the state might model a strong consultation process that LEAs can in turn replicate. • Commit to ongoing stakeholder engagement as opposed to limiting to pre application process. • See other suggestions throughout the document regarding advisors.

Appendix A: ESSA's Definition of Professional Learning

Definition of Professional Development (from Sec. 8002 General Provisions – Definitions)

“PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.—The term ‘professional development’ means activities that—

- “(A) are an integral part of school and local educational agency strategies for providing educators (including teachers, principals, other school leaders, specialized instructional support personnel, paraprofessionals, and, as applicable, early childhood educators) with the knowledge and skills necessary to enable students to succeed in a well-rounded education and to meet the challenging State academic standards; and
- “(B) are sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused, and may include activities that—
 - “(i) improve and increase teachers’—
 - “(I) knowledge of the academic subjects the teachers teach;
 - “(II) understanding of how students learn; and
 - “(III) ability to analyze student work and achievement from multiple sources, including how to adjust instructional strategies, assessments, and materials based on such analysis;
 - “(ii) are an integral part of broad school-wide and district-wide educational improvement plans;
 - “(iii) allow personalized plans for each educator to address the educator’s specific needs identified in observation or other feedback;
 - “(iv) improve classroom management skills;
 - “(v) support the recruitment, hiring, and training of effective teachers, including teachers who became certified through State and local alternative routes to certification;
 - “(vi) advance teacher understanding of—
 - “(I) effective instructional strategies that are evidence-based; and
 - “(II) strategies for improving student academic achievement or substantially increasing the knowledge and teaching skills of teachers;
 - “(vii) are aligned with, and directly related to, academic goals of the school or local educational agency;
 - “(viii) are developed with extensive participation of teachers, principals, other school leaders, parents, representatives of Indian tribes (as applicable), and administrators of schools to be served under this Act;
 - “(ix) are designed to give teachers of English learners, and other teachers and instructional staff, the knowledge and skills to provide instruction and appropriate language and academic support services to those children, including the appropriate use of curricula and assessments;
 - “(x) to the extent appropriate, provide training for teachers, principals, and other school leaders in the use of technology (including education about the harms of copyright piracy), so that technology and technology applications are effectively used in the classroom to improve teaching and learning in the curricula and academic subjects in which the teachers teach;
 - “(xi) as a whole, are regularly evaluated for their impact on increased teacher effectiveness and improved student academic achievement, with the findings of the evaluations used to improve the quality of professional development;
 - “(xii) are designed to give teachers of children with disabilities or children with developmental delays, and other teachers and instructional staff, the knowledge and skills to provide instruction and academic support services, to those children, including positive behavioral interventions and supports, multi-tier system of supports, and use

- of accommodations;
- “(xiii) include instruction in the use of data and assessments to inform and instruct classroom practice;
 - “(xiv) include instruction in ways that teachers, principals, other school leaders, specialized instructional support personnel, and school administrators may work more effectively with parents and families;
 - “(xv) involve the forming of partnerships with institutions of higher education, including, as applicable, Tribal Colleges and Universities as defined in section 316(b) of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1059c(b)), to establish school-based teacher, principal, and other prospective teachers, novice teachers, principals, and other school leaders with an opportunity to work under the guidance of experienced teachers, principals, other school leaders, and faculty of such institutions;
 - “(xvi) create programs to enable paraprofessionals (assisting teachers employed by a local educational agency receiving assistance under part A of title I) to obtain the education necessary for those paraprofessionals to become certified and licensed teachers;
 - “(xvii) provide follow-up training to teachers who have participated in activities described in this paragraph that are designed to ensure that the knowledge and skills learned by the teachers are implemented in the classroom; and
 - “(xviii) where practicable, provide jointly for school staff and other early childhood education program providers, to address the transition to elementary school, including issues related to school readiness.”