

Identifying the Nation’s Lowest Performing Schools: Shifts Following the Passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

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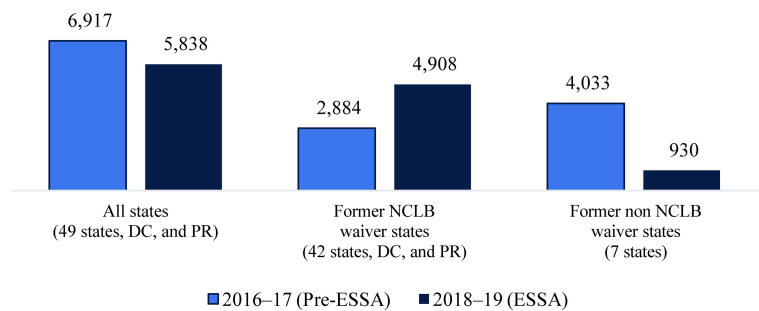
For over two decades, federal law has required states to identify their low-performing schools to best focus improvement efforts. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 sought to address perceived problems with prior school accountability policies, including too many schools being labeled as low performing. ESSA introduced new flexibilities and requirements for how states evaluate school performance and identify schools most in need of intensive support, now designated as Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools. This study examined if ESSA played out as policymakers expected or if there were any other consequences for the number, types, and composition of schools that states identified by comparing those identified just before (2016-17) and just after (2018-19) ESSA’s implementation.

Key Findings

- **Consistent with ESSA’s intent to better focus improvement efforts on the lowest performing schools, a smaller set of schools was identified following implementation.**

This reduction was driven by the seven states that, before ESSA, were still operating under the previous No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law’s accountability rules (see exhibit). Most other states had “waivers” from NCLB, granting flexibilities similar to ESSA.

Number of schools identified for the most intensive support



- **Changes in the types of schools identified—specifically, more alternative, small, and charter schools—may have resulted from ESSA’s intent to broaden the range of schools eligible for CSI identification.** This shift aligns with federal guidance under ESSA to apply the same evaluation methodology to all schools, except for rare circumstances.
- **Expanding accountability measures beyond test scores under ESSA did not seem to decrease the identification of schools with the lowest achievement.** While ESSA sought to make schools accountable for more than student achievement on state tests, identified schools were still among those with the lowest test scores. Still, under ESSA, many of the lowest achieving schools were not identified as CSI.
- **However, ESSA may have reduced the focus on schools with high concentrations of historically underserved students.** This shift may be related to ESSA providing states with greater flexibility to use new performance measures less correlated with poverty, such as student achievement growth.

As policymakers and practitioners continue implementing ESSA, this study raises considerations for the path forward and lays the foundation for future assessments of the identification of schools for support.