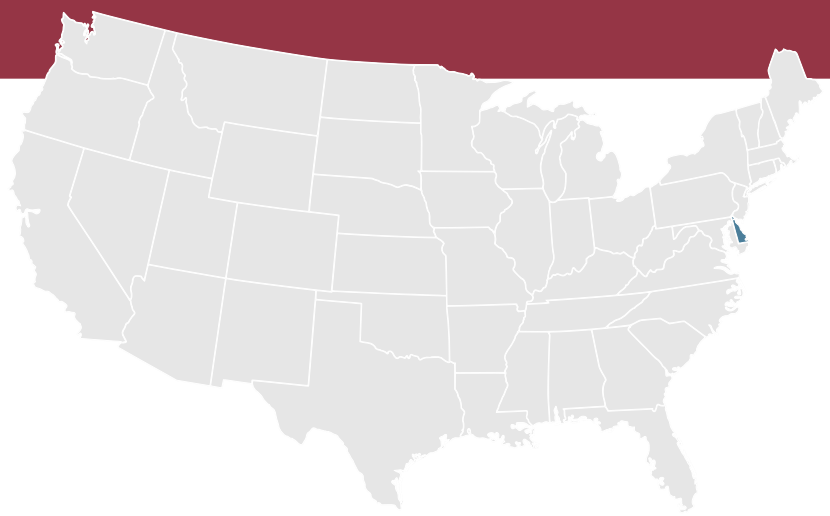


An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



Delaware

Project Overview

In partnership with the Collaborative for Student Success, Bellwether Education Partners, convened an objective, independent panel of accountability experts to review ESSA state plans. We sought out a diverse group of peer reviewers with a range of political viewpoints and backgrounds, and we asked them to review each state's accountability plan with an eye toward capturing strengths and weaknesses.

We aimed to provide constructive feedback to the states, and to serve as a source of straightforward information to the public so that they are better able to engage policymakers if and how they see fit. Inherently, this independent process could not take into account the numerous political and situational challenges that occur in every state. We are in no way attempting to diminish those challenges, but the scope of this review was to compare the rigor and comprehensive nature of state accountability plans.

Peers worked in small teams to review the plans that states formally submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. After writing their own reviews independently, the peers met for two days to discuss their individual reviews and work together on the collaborative draft you'll see below. The teams were asked to use their discretion and expertise to respond to and score each rubric item, and those scores were normed across states and peers.

Each state was given the opportunity to review the draft peer analysis and to provide substantive additions and corrections. Still, the reviews should be considered a snapshot of state plans as of April–June 2017, and we anticipate that states will continue to update their plans going forward.

To read more about the project, as well as a list of the expert peer reviewers, visit the Bellwether website [here](#).

Overall Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths: What are the most promising aspects of the state’s plan? What parts are worth emulating by other states?

Delaware has made a number of improvements to its educational system over the years, and its ESSA plan is attempting to build on that progress. Its accountability system is built on the backbone of strong college- and career-ready standards and tests, and it has put in place a number of policies to steer more students toward college and career success. Delaware has also clearly sought out and respected the feedback from stakeholder groups. Throughout its plan, it cites specific feedback as an explanation for why it’s pursuing the option it chose.

More specifically, Delaware has carefully selected a simple list of high-quality indicators to include in its accountability system, including a focus on students being ready for college and careers. By lowering its minimum group size from 30 to 15, Delaware is ensuring more schools will be asked to pay attention to the performance of important subgroups of students. By including science and social studies in the accountability system, the state is signaling the critical importance of a well-rounded education for all students. Delaware’s approach to measuring English-language proficiency contains a number of interesting, innovative experiments, although its accountability system undermines those efforts somewhat (see more detail below).

Finally, in addition to the indicators used for formal school-rating purposes, the state has clearly articulated another set of measures that it will track and report on school report cards for public transparency purposes. Delaware includes these measures in its robust school report card, which complements the focused accountability system framework.

Weaknesses: What are the most pressing areas for the state to improve in its plan? What aspects should other states avoid?

While Delaware’s framework is strong, its plan is vague in several areas. It does not articulate how most of its individual accountability components would be measured, or how they would factor into overall ratings. Delaware’s plan seems to propose multiple school-identification systems that the state is still considering, but all are underdeveloped.

Similarly, Delaware’s plan lacks clarity on how exactly it would hold schools with large achievement gaps accountable. It doesn’t specify how many schools would be identified or what steps they would be asked to take. More broadly, the state’s plan for improving low-performing schools lacks specificity and could allow schools to stagnate rather than improve.

Finally, the state’s long-term vision is not fully reflected in its ESSA plan. This plan should be the vehicle by which the state’s educational vision is enacted—yet it is difficult to follow the through-line from vision to implementation

Plan Components

Each state’s plan has been rated on a scale of 1 (“This practice should be avoided by other states”) to 5 (“This could be a potential model for other states”).

Goals: Are the state’s vision, goals, and interim targets aligned, ambitious, and attainable? Why or why not?



Delaware’s “Student Success 2025,” developed with stakeholders over the past few years, presents a comprehensive vision for student achievement in the state. While the state’s ESSA plan is meant to implement that vision, the state missed the opportunity to clearly articulate the connections between that vision and this plan. The plan is difficult to make coherent sense of—and many decisions in the document appear to be driven by stakeholder survey responses rather than aligned to the state’s expressed long-term vision.

Having said this, there are specifics worth noting. Delaware has articulated a vision of improving proficiency rates and graduation rates by 50 percent by the year 2030. The state has also articulated interim targets overall and for each subgroup. The beneficial effect of this approach is that it demands that lower-performing subgroups make faster progress than higher-performing groups, thus closing achievement gaps over time.

However, Delaware had previously aimed to reach these same targets by the year 2017. While the plan cites stakeholder buy-in for continuing the same methodology, applying the same target to a much longer time frame suggests a much less ambitious goal. Moreover, Delaware’s 2030 proficiency target is not tied to any particular objective bar or benchmarks, nor is it supported by any historical trend analysis. While Delaware’s approach may have stakeholder buy-in, it’s unclear if the targets are sufficiently ambitious. Cutting the achievement gap in half over the next 14 years may indeed be an accomplishment, but absent more data on what Delaware schools have accomplished in the past, it’s hard to know if that goal is ambitious or realistic.

Standards and Assessments: Is the state’s accountability system built on high-quality standards and assessments aligned to college and career readiness? Why or why not?

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Delaware’s standards are strong and it has a high-quality assessment system in grades 3-8 through the Smarter Balanced consortium. At the high school level, Delaware is using the SAT as its accountability assessment. That choice has pros and cons. On one hand, the SAT is familiar to students and families, and it is recognized at colleges all across the country. On the other hand, absent an independent review, we don’t yet know whether the SAT is fully aligned to Delaware’s state academic standards. It is also unclear if there are sufficient accommodations in place for English learners and students with disabilities. Similarly, Delaware could strengthen its plan by providing the steps it will take to ensure that the state does not exceed the 1 percent cap on participation in the alternate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Delaware also deserves credit for including its assessments of science and social studies in its accountability system. That decision will help lessen concerns about curriculum narrowing and will force schools to pay attention to student performance beyond reading and math.

Indicators: Are the state’s chosen accountability indicators aligned to ensure targets and goals are met and likely to lead to improved educational outcomes for students? Why or why not?

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Delaware has chosen a simple list of high-quality indicators to include in its accountability system (academic achievement, academic growth, ninth-grade on-track, chronic absenteeism, college and career preparedness, graduation rates, and progress on English-language acquisition). In addition to the indicators used for formal school-rating purposes, Delaware has clearly articulated another set of measures that it will track and report on school report cards for public transparency purposes.

The “college and career preparedness” indicator is particularly noteworthy. The state proposes reporting the percent of students who are postsecondary-ready—as evidenced by demonstrating college readiness (earning at least one of these: AP credit, IB credit, other postsecondary credit, or a college-readiness score on the SAT) *and* career readiness (earning at least one of these: a recognized industry credential, a certificate of multiliteracy, work-based learning credit, or a military-ready score on the ASVAB). Delaware should monitor its data to ensure that each measure aligns with later success, but it deserves credit for pushing in a direction that allows all students to demonstrate advanced skills along multiple pathways.

However, although Delaware’s proposed list of indicators is relatively simple, the state has not given much detail about how those measures will be calculated, nor does it specify how indicators such as academic progress and school quality/student success will be folded into the accountability system. The growth measures are particularly confusing (see below). As another example, Delaware is proposing to incorporate four-, five-, and six-year graduation rates into its accountability system, but it does not specify how it would weight each of those, or if it would keep a primary focus on the four-year rate.

Academic Progress: Has the state created sufficient incentives for schools to care about both student proficiency and student growth over time? Why or why not?



Delaware has placed a large emphasis on student progress in its accountability system, giving growth a weight of 35 percent of the total (the largest single weighting of any measure).

However, it’s not clear how Delaware is actually planning to measure growth. In different places in its submission, it mentions three different growth metrics—overall growth, growth to proficiency, and growth of the lowest- and highest-performing quartiles of students. It mentions that these are open conversations and that stakeholders have had trouble interpreting its past growth model calculations. All three of the models have strengths and weaknesses, but the state should be clear about why they’ve picked these models and how much each will be weighted. This is especially important given the communications challenges Delaware identified.

Delaware’s plan is noteworthy for its relatively sophisticated model for tracking English learners’ progress in reaching full English-language proficiency. The plan has two components:

- As with most states in the WIDA consortium, Delaware sets each student’s individual English proficiency timeline according to his or her initial scores and subsequent progress. That is, students who initially score higher have shorter language-acquisition timelines than students who initially score lower.
- In addition, Delaware is allowing students to earn partial credit on their annual growth goals (or bonus credit for students who exceed targets).

This proposal is interesting, and it’s worthy of further study to better understand if the incentives it creates are strong enough to drive classroom behaviors for those supporting English Learners.

All Students: Does the state system mask the performance of some subgroups of students, or does it have adequate checks in place to ensure all students (including all subgroups of students) receive a high-quality education? Why or why not?

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As mentioned above, Delaware has given deep consideration to its methodology for measuring the performance of English learners, but it weakens that approach somewhat in its school accountability system. It proposes to delay the full inclusion of newly arrived English learners in its accountability systems until they have been in Delaware schools for four consecutive years, which excludes students who are most at risk of being left behind.

Delaware deserves credit for lowering its n-size, the minimum group size used to determine if schools should be held accountable for the performance of subgroups, from 30 to 15. Lowering the n-size will ensure more schools are paying attention to more subgroups of students, and the state provides compelling data on how many more students will be included as a result of this change. This analysis is enlightening and a practice other states should consider, if only for internal purposes. Because the lower n-size will also add extra volatility, the state may want to consider running statistical tests to monitor year-to-year swings to see if they reflect real changes, and if not, including multiple years of data in its calculations.

But, despite making subgroup scores publicly available, it does not appear that Delaware will be incorporating subgroup scores into the state's school-rating system. While not ideal, this could be acceptable if Delaware outlined clear, rigorous criteria to identify "targeted support" schools with low-performing subgroups. But, although the state plans to identify some schools under this definition, it's unclear if the state is planning to identify 5 percent of *each* subgroup (i.e., the 5 percent of schools with the lowest-performing subgroup of black students, the 5 percent of schools with the lowest-performing subgroup of students with disabilities, etc.) or if the state is envisioning one composite group based on *all* subgroups. The former would be a stronger plan and would allow for more tailored interventions than one composite group of "achievement gap" schools. Later, on pages 56-57, Delaware seems to imply the stronger approach, but it never mentions how it will actually make final determinations.

Identifying Schools: Is the state’s plan to identify schools for comprehensive and targeted support likely to identify the schools and student groups most in need?

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As noted above, Delaware has not articulated a clear strategy for identifying schools in need of additional support. In different places in the state’s plan, it proposes two distinct identification systems. First, it proposes a percentage-based weighting system to identify schools that need “comprehensive” and “targeted” support. Although it does give an indication of the overall weighting among those components, it does not specify how those components will be defined or incorporated. At another point, Delaware mentions that it will be converting these metrics into a 500-point scale, but it’s not clear how that would work. Delaware does propose turning this into more parent-friendly language by categorizing schools (e.g., “exceeds,” “meets expectations,” or “meets few expectations”), though how schools would be placed into a category is unclear (and the language remains jargon-heavy, with frequent use of “CS” or “TS” designations standing in for “comprehensive” or “targeted” support schools).

Beyond those questions, Delaware is planning to focus its accountability system on schoolwide averages, and its rating system does not account for subgroups of students within a school. Presumably, it will be using these schoolwide averages to identify “comprehensive” support schools—and it will rerun its accountability scores for each subgroup of schools in each school to identify schools to be identified for “targeted” support. The state has run extensive models and simulations to ensure that its process captures the “right” schools, but its submitted plan was not clear on that front.

Supporting Schools: Are the state’s planned interventions in comprehensive and targeted support schools evidence-based and sufficiently rigorous to match the challenges those schools face? Why or why not?

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Delaware’s plan to support schools is vague. The state seeks to tailor support to individual schools, and thus requires a needs assessment for every identified school. No criteria are specified for the content of these plans or for how the state will review them or approve the funding requests that accompany them. (The state has set aside \$3 million for school-improvement activities, which it will distribute on a formula basis.)

Delaware has articulated a detailed timeline for identifying schools and monitoring performance, but it proposes to identify schools in November of each year. This seems late in the year, nearly six months after the end of the school year for which the identification is based. Delaware may want to consider ways to move that timeline up (perhaps using multiple years of data) so that students can benefit faster from any required actions.

Exiting Improvement Status: Are the state’s criteria for schools to exit comprehensive and targeted support status sufficient to demonstrate sustained improvements? Why or why not?

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Delaware did not identify specific criteria for schools to exit improvement status other than to say that districts will negotiate targets for each identified school. The lack of a unified, statewide approach could present a challenge for the state to hold a transparent, consistent bar across schools. Even for schools that fail to exit improvement status within four years, the state has not articulated any specific actions or steps they must take, other than working with an external partner on an additional needs assessment. This feels unlikely to meet the challenges faced by those schools. The state should instead consider defining the series of escalations that will occur if schools continue to flounder.

Continuous Improvement: Has the state outlined a clear plan to learn from its implementation efforts and modify its actions accordingly, including through continued consultation and engagement of key stakeholders? If not, what steps could the state take to do so?

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Delaware does not include a plan for continuously improving the *state’s* efforts. It does mention how it will support *district* efforts at continuous improvement, but it is short on details on its own feedback mechanisms and how it would change its own practices over time based on that feedback. For example, the state could outline the steps it will take over time to settle on accountability indicators and their definitions, as well as monitor and tweak its school-identification system over time. Throughout its plan, Delaware has built in comments from its stakeholder engagement efforts, and it could outline ways it will continue to seek that sort of engagement going forward as well.