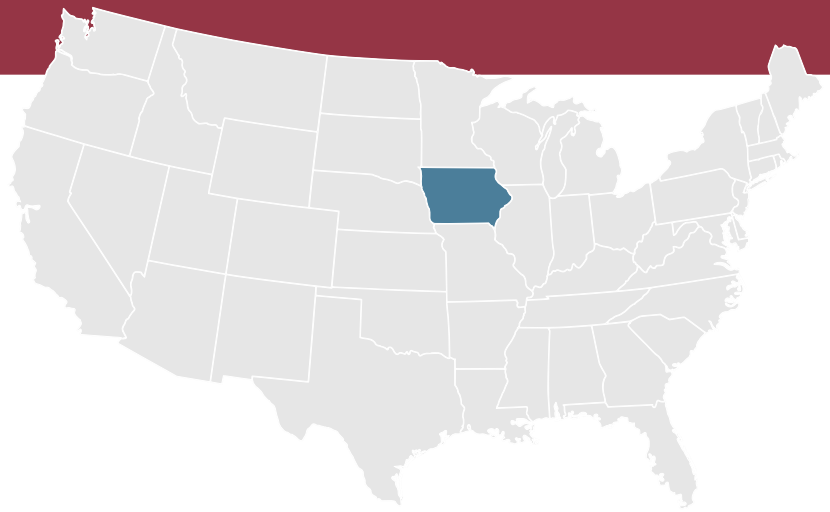


An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



Iowa

Project Overview

Bellwether Education Partners, in partnership with the Collaborative for Student Success, 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 reviewing 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 September–November 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?

Iowa’s plan has a lot to like. While there was clearly a lot of consultation between the state education agency and districts, educators, support organizations, parents, and other stakeholders, the state manages to present a coherent vision that speaks to its leadership role. Iowa’s plan offers a collaborative vision that is clear, well articulated, and realized in the state’s proposed activities. Iowa has also presented a compelling case and a thoughtful plan for tweaking its system over time. Other states should look to Iowa’s plan as an example of how to put forward a clear vision, match it with aligned goals, and support it with activities designed to achieve those goals.

In addition, Iowa has identified a small set of compelling school indicators (including student voice and postsecondary readiness), paired those with strong academic indicators, and weighted them in ways that send positive signals to schools.

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

Iowa’s plan suffers from some uncertainty around its new assessments and how the assessments will affect its accountability system in future years. The state’s accountability and support system depends heavily on having reliable data as its foundation, and the state must take every step possible to ensure its new assessments cover the full depth and breadth of the state’s standards and align to college and career readiness.

In addition, Iowa’s school improvement plan is extremely short and lacks any specific actions the state would take in the event of persistent low performance. While the state makes broad overtures to ensure that schools select evidence-based interventions, it has specifically declined to identify a list of interventions it considers to be evidence-based. It also does not mention how it will spend the 7 percent of its federal funds that are dedicated to school improvement activities.

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?



The state leaders in Iowa have taken seriously their responsibility, not only to devise a plan for supporting the improvement of schools, but also to communicate their plan clearly to educators, parents, and citizens. The plan begins with a one-page statement of the state’s guiding principles, followed by a five-page overview of the plan. This executive summary lays out the three major strategies, how these connect to the guiding principles, and how they will be accomplished through an infrastructure for the delivery of services and supports. The remainder of the plan then clearly ties back to this overview, indicating how the state will operationalize each piece. Iowa deserves credit for including this preamble in its ESSA plan—despite the fact that states were not required to do so—and other states should consider a similar approach to explaining vision, goals, strategies, and activities.

Iowa notes that reading and math proficiency has been flat over the past three years, regardless of subgroup, so the state set long-term and interim goals in light of this recent performance. As such, it expects average gains of only 0.5 percent a year. The state does expect slightly greater progress from lower-performing groups—1 percent a year versus 0.5 percent—but these targets would still leave intact large achievement gaps. For example, Iowa’s long-term goal is for only about half of its black students to be proficient in reading and math by the year 2022, compared to 80 percent of all students statewide. One may agree or disagree with the specific goals and rationales, but the state scores high for its honest and direct analyses, explanations, and targets. As the state transitions to new assessments and revises its goals, its plan could be further improved by including truly long-term goals that put forward a vision of equity that is consistent with the state’s expressed guiding principles; this would signal to citizens that Iowa is serious about addressing its persistent achievement gaps.

In contrast to its flatlining achievement scores, Iowa has improved its graduation rate by roughly 0.5 percent over the last seven years. Iowa has set a goal that 95 percent of its students will graduate within four years, and it applies this same goal to all subgroups of students. To accommodate students who may need additional time, Iowa has also set a goal of 97 percent of its students graduating within five years’ time.

Iowa has found it takes a typical English learner five years to gain English proficiency. It aims to improve the percentage of students obtaining English proficiency by 1 percent a year, and has set a goal for 23.7 percent of English learners to be proficient by the year 2022. Again, while this may appear unambitious on the surface, Iowa presents historical data suggesting this is faster progress than it has made in recent years.

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?

- 1
- ✓ 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Iowa has adopted high standards, but its assessments are in transition. The quality of the new assessment, and its alignment to the depth and rigor of the state’s standards, is unknown. If the assessment is not high quality, many of the other elements of the state’s plan—from its goals to its accountability system to its plan to identify low-performing schools—could be compromised. The state must be vigilant in ensuring that the new assessment adequately measures student learning and growth.

In addition, Iowa has adopted standards for early learning that describe “the knowledge, behaviors, and skills that children from birth through age five may demonstrate during the first 2,000 days of life” and for “21st Century Skills,” which includes civic literacy, financial literacy, health literacy, technology literacy, and employability skills.

Other assessments used in the state’s accountability system are Dynamic Learning Maps for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, and ELPA21 for English learners. Iowa defines “languages other than English that are present to a significant extent in the participating student population” as any language that represents 4 percent or more of English learners. In Iowa, Spanish meets this definition, and the state’s new assessment will have a Spanish version, but the next closest language, Karen, falls just short at 3.8 percent. Finally, although Iowa indicates it has processes and procedures to ensure it does not exceed the 1 percent cap on participation in the alternate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, it could have strengthened its plan by offering more detail on those steps.

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?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- ✓ 4
- 5

Iowa is planning to hold schools accountable for a relatively short list of high-quality indicators. It has chosen a mix of indicators that will give schools incentives to pay attention to a number of important academic and non-academic student outcomes. As in other sections of the plan, the state does an outstanding job of describing its rationale for the indicators it has selected and the weights it has assigned to each indicator.

Iowa's elementary and middle schools will be accountable for participation rates; achievement, as measured by average scale scores and proficiency rates; student growth, as measured by student growth percentiles; progress in achieving English language proficiency; and a "Conditions for Learning" survey. The survey will measure student safety, engagement, and environment, which should complement the academic measures. Iowa has also provided evidence that its survey instrument is valid and reliable, will be comparable statewide, and can be disaggregated by subgroup. The survey is also given to all parents and staff, but it is the student's voice that counts in the accountability context. This innovative approach to empowering student voice is worth watching.

It is worth noting that Iowa has included assessment participation rate as one of the school's accountability indicators, thus making it clear that the state wants to see data on every student included in the accountability system. The metric is simple: "Did more than 95% of all students, and of students in each subgroup, take the assessment—yes or no?" "Yes" earns 10 percentage points; "No" earns 0. This focus will give schools an incentive to include all students and help preserve the statistical soundness of the system. However, Iowa's plan would be even stronger if it included consequences for schools that miss the 95 percent participation threshold, overall or for particular subgroups.

Iowa's high schools will be accountable for a similar list of indicators, and Iowa deserves particular credit for being able to include growth and the same survey instrument for high school students, which creates additional alignment within the system. The only differences are the addition of graduation rates and, in the future, a postsecondary readiness indicator. Iowa plans to include both four- and five-year graduation rates, which encourages schools to help all students graduate, but it does not specify how it would balance these two different rates. It could strengthen its plan, and better align its accountability system with its long-term goals, by giving greater weight to the four-year rate.

Iowa also deserves credit for responsibly adding a postsecondary readiness metric to its high school accountability system over time. Although the data and calculations are not yet ready for inclusion, Iowa recognizes stakeholder interest in an indicator of this type, and it has laid out a process to begin collecting the data, build out the indicator over time, and give it increasing weight in the accountability system.

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?



Iowa's accountability system plans to include both student achievement and growth, but it is unclear how much weight it will place on students reaching the state's grade-level standards. Its achievement measure would include both average scale scores and the percentage of students who are proficient in its achievement measure, but it does not provide the relative weights of these two measures, nor does it specify how it will convert the raw data into indicator ratings for schools.

Iowa's proposed growth model, called Student Growth Percentiles (SGP), compares the progress students make against their similarly performing peers and converts those scores into percentiles. While this approach is relatively simple to calculate and interpret, it does not ensure students cover the content they need to master to stay on track toward mastery at graduation. Still, Iowa deserves credit for applying this calculation to schools of all grade levels, when most states are unable to do so in high schools. Iowa's plan gives almost twice as much weight to student growth as to achievement, thus sending schools a clear signal that improving student outcomes is their mission. However, the state should monitor its data to ensure that students also cover the content they need to master to stay on track toward mastery at graduation.

Iowa is also planning to use the SGP approach to English learners. While this could create greater alignment within the state's accountability system, it's unclear how SGPs may work in this context, and Iowa should monitor its data to ensure it is providing sufficient incentives for helping English learners reach English proficiency over time.

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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2

✓ 3

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Despite Iowa's stated focus on equity, it is difficult to identify specific policies (beyond those required under law and its handling of participation rates) designed to identify, highlight, and address the needs of disadvantaged or special needs students.

Iowa's school rating system does not include specific weights for subgroup performance, but it has articulated a process for identifying schools with low subgroup performance. Any school where any subgroup of students is performing, on its own, as poorly as the bottom 5 percent of schools is identified as in need of targeted support. And if any subgroup has a "zero-to-negative growth trajectory" for three years in the accountability index, that school would also be identified for targeted support.

However, Iowa could improve its plan by clarifying a few points. For example, it's not entirely clear what a "zero-to-negative growth trajectory" for three years would mean. Would scores need to decline for three consecutive years for a school to be identified, or is the comparison based on two points in time, three years apart? And how will the state compare years as it transitions to new assessments and incorporates new accountability indicators? The plan does not appear to answer these questions, and Iowa has not provided estimates on the number or types of schools its rules would identify as in need of targeted support.

To define what makes for a sufficient number of students to count as an official subgroup, Iowa ran calculations to determine what level was statistically sound but also included as many students and schools as possible. Given those results, and after consultation with stakeholder groups, it settled on a minimum size of 20 students.

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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- 2
- ✓ 3
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- 5

Iowa is planning to modify the weights of its accountability system over time, but it has articulated a clear process for testing new measures and phasing them into the system. In addition, as the state transitions to a new set of assessments, many of the calculations used to determine student achievement and growth, and to identify schools, are very much up in the air.

In its current plan, Iowa’s school identification process starts with a simple index based on the indicators outlined above. To identify schools for improvement, it asks a series of questions, starting with whether the school is a high school with a graduation rate of 66 percent or less. Then, it identifies the bottom 5 percent of schools on its index as in need of comprehensive support.

Any school where any subgroup of students is performing, on its own, as poorly as the bottom 5 percent of schools is identified as in need of targeted support. If any subgroup is not making progress on its index score for three years, that school is also identified for targeted support. Iowa will begin identifying schools in 2018-19 and then run its formal accountability system on a three-year cycle. Because the state’s accountability indicators are so clearly weighted toward academics in general, and student growth in particular, Iowa is more likely than other states to identify those schools most in need of support or intervention.

However, while Iowa’s question-based approach is noteworthy, it could improve its plan by being clearer in a couple of places. For example, it says it will identify high schools with graduation rates below 66 percent, but it doesn’t say whether that is based on the four- or five-year rate. Additionally, at one point in the plan Iowa says it may not begin identifying schools with consistently underperforming subgroups until 2021-22, but federal law requires it happen sooner than that.

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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- ✓ 2
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Iowa’s plan for supporting low-performing schools is short and lacks specificity. As is required by ESSA, Iowa says low-performing schools will be required to complete needs assessments that will identify priority areas, and districts with at least one comprehensive support school must undergo a resource allocation review. Iowa’s

regional educational agencies will be asked to review the interventions that schools select, and the state has produced lengthy “facilitation guides” to help schools examine their data, identify needs, and design and monitor student-level interventions, but the state has specifically declined to identify a list of high-quality interventions from which schools can choose. While local control is a foundation of Iowa’s schools, the state must not allow that argument to stop its responsibility for intervening in situations where students are not being served well.

Iowa also has not specified how it plans to spend the 7 percent set-aside of federal funds devoted to school improvement activities, nor does it specify whether it will be taking the optional 3 percent set-aside for the state to invest in additional Direct Student Services.

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?



Iowa plans to allow comprehensive and targeted support schools to exit only if they’ve demonstrated progress and shown evidence of implementing evidence-based improvement strategies, and only after three years. This will send a positive message that schools cannot exit status merely by leaping over their competitors; they have to actually show progress and show they have implemented a successful improvement model.

Iowa has a unique proposal for schools that are improving, but not enough to be out of the bottom 5 percent. Iowa proposes, for example, that if a school identified in 2019 has shown some progress by the year 2022, but not enough progress to escape the bottom 5 percent of schools statewide, the school would be allowed to exit status. A better way to acknowledge the school’s progress while still flagging its need to keep improving might be to reset the accountability clock rather than forcing it to undergo more rigorous interventions. That is, Iowa could still identify schools in this situation, but treat them differently than schools that failed to improve at all.

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?



The plan provides a lot of documents on the stakeholder and expert engagement that was conducted around the plan’s development. Iowa says its guiding principles in implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act are that implementation will be done in an “inclusive process that balances various internal and external stakeholder inputs” and that it will communicate frequently with the field. However, the plan would be stronger if it included an explicit mechanism for accomplishing this.

Iowa does deserve credit, however, for building a smart process of stakeholder engagement as it modifies its accountability system over time. For example, it plans to expand the grades reached by its student survey, and it will be phasing in an indicator focused on postsecondary readiness.