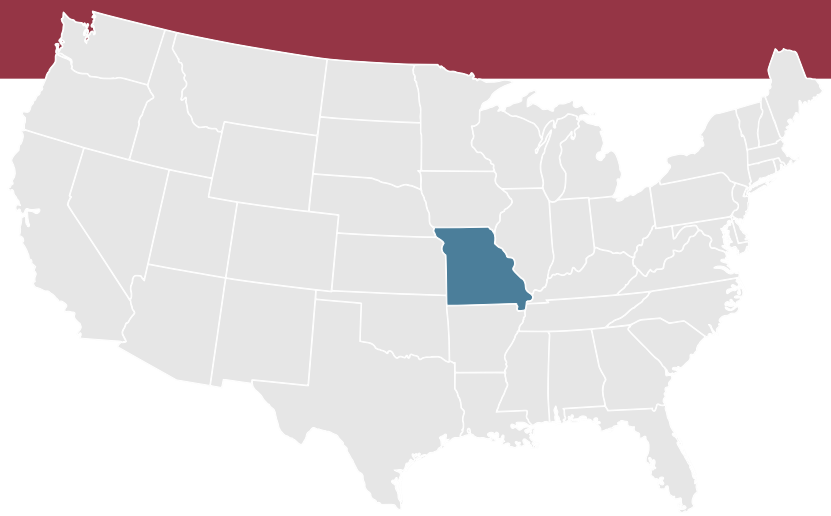


# An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



## Missouri

### *Project Overview*

**B**ellwether 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?

Missouri’s approach to developing its accountability system includes strong emphasis on academic indicators, in which achievement and growth contribute a substantial majority of the weight in the overall system. The state’s academic achievement indicator will provide an incentive for schools to address the instructional needs of students across the continuum of performance. In particular, the state’s approach to the 95 percent participation requirement sends a strong signal to schools that all students must be assessed.

Missouri looked to leverage existing structures, processes, and resources, and the submitted plan describes a tiered system of support for struggling schools that emphasizes evidence-based strategies, leadership capacity, and stakeholder engagement.

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

Missouri’s plan lacks detail in a number of areas. The plan does not include sufficient data or enough detail to explain the implications of the various choices it has made. The introduction includes an overview of the separate state accountability system which references many promising features. However, it appears that the accountability system the state proposes to fulfill ESSA requirements will be based on a smaller set of indicators than the state’s Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP) system, effectively establishing two separate accountability systems for schools to navigate.

The structure of Missouri’s accountability system pays insufficient attention to subgroup performance. The state’s long-term goals reflect much lower long-term expectations for some groups of students, especially for students with disabilities. Additionally, the state’s goals for progress to English language proficiency stand out as particularly low and lack urgency for improving the life outcomes for the state’s English learners.

Within the accountability structure itself, several issues contrive to mask underperformance among student subgroups. First, the state will not include subgroups with fewer than 30 students, which is a relatively high threshold, and the state does not provide data or documentation supporting this decision. Second, subgroup performance is not weighted in the calculation of accountability scores, nor does the state include any discrete measures in its list of indicators that would illuminate disparities in performance among groups of students.

The predominant indicators in the plan focus almost entirely on test scores in English language arts and math. This approach fails to take advantage of the opportunity to include additional measures that could provide a more holistic assessment of school performance.

Beyond challenges with identification, it is unclear what consequences the state will impose for persistent low performance in the context of its overall support system for struggling schools, and the plan offers little evidence that schools will be required to engage in aggressive, transformative strategies likely to drive improvement with urgency.

## 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?



Missouri’s vision—to ensure that all students have access to opportunities to prepare them for success in school and life—is operationalized with an overall goal of getting all students college and career ready by graduation. However, the state’s vision is not connected to its long-term goals. The state’s ESSA plan establishes specific goals of reducing the rate of non-proficiency and the percent of students failing to graduate by half within 10 years. By focusing on a proportional reduction in the gap between student and subgroup performance and proficiency and graduation, this approach attempts to ensure that if goals are attained, gaps between subgroups will narrow but not close entirely.

The state provides no historical data on which the goals can be judged as ambitious or attainable, and as such the 10-year targets for some subgroups appear remarkably low. Missouri expects less than half of students with disabilities to achieve proficiency under this plan in either ELA or math, and less than two-thirds of black students and students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch to achieve proficiency in math.

Goals for improved graduation rates also appear modest, due in large part to baseline graduation rates exceeding 85 percent for all groups except English learners and students with disabilities.

Missouri’s goals for progress toward English proficiency are based on an assumed six-year timeline to proficiency and raise concerns for lack of ambition. Over a 10-year period, the state aims to increase the percent of English learners achieving proficiency each year by about 6 percentage points. This level of increase may be challenging given that Missouri offers no assessments in languages other than English.

**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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Missouri’s standards and assessment system is in transition. In 2015, the state revised its standards, and required the development of new, aligned assessments. The 2017-18 school year is the first year in which the state will administer English language arts and math assessments based on the new standards, with science and social studies assessments rolling out over the subsequent years following field testing.

Missouri’s assessment program also includes a system of end-of-course exams at the high school level, of which Algebra I, English I, Biology, and Government are required for graduation. Students who complete Algebra I prior to high school are required to take the Algebra II end-of-course exam for accountability purposes.

Missouri could provide more information about how it will provide accommodations to English learners and students with disabilities to ensure they are able to demonstrate knowledge on the assessments.

Missouri could strengthen its plan by providing more information about its alternate achievement standards and aligned assessments for students with the most severe cognitive disabilities. Additionally, the state would have a stronger plan if it provided the steps it will take to ensure that it does not exceed the 1 percent cap on participation in the alternate assessments.

**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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Missouri will assess a limited number of indicators that includes academic achievement on ELA and math assessments, a value-added measure of growth, English language proficiency, graduation rates, and student attendance. While this short list elevates the impact of its achievement and growth measures in the accountability system, it also means Missouri did not take advantage of ESSA’s flexibility to include measures that could build a richer picture of school performance and progress. For example, the state includes college- and career-readiness measures in its state accountability system, and yet it does not appear those measures will be included in its federal accountability system. This represents a missed opportunity, especially given that Missouri identifies its number-one strategic priority as ensuring all students are ready for college and careers upon graduation. Additionally, although Missouri plans to test students in science and social studies, it does not mention incorporating these results into its federal accountability system. The lack of alignment between state and federal accountability requirements may create confusion as schools and stakeholders grapple with two parallel systems.

The state's indicator for progress toward English language proficiency is a composite measure that combines participation rates on the WIDA ACCESS, the percentage of students attaining English proficiency, and growth toward English proficiency. This combination is overly complex and partially redundant. The state should consider focusing this indicator more narrowly on whether English learners are making progress towards English language proficiency versus providing credit for simple participation on the assessment.

The state will consider only the four-year graduation rate for accountability, which may discourage schools from continuing to work with students to earn their high school diplomas after four years.

Additionally, Missouri will employ a statistical methodology to convert its indicators to a "normal curve equivalent" unit, which will be weighted and combined into a single accountability score. This statistical technique allows indicators to be combined easily into a summative rating in a valid and reliable way. However, it will effectively convert every indicator into a relative measure of performance, assigning value based on how schools perform compared to one another and not to any objective standard. Additionally, the state provides no indication within the plan of how this complex methodology will be explained to parents and educators.

The measure of academic progress involves a Value-Added Model that has potential, and the state deserves credit for including technical details on the model in an appendix. However, not enough detail is provided about how this indicator will actually be measured year-over-year and used in the state's accountability system. In particular, it is not clear how the state's growth model aligns with its long-term goals given that it is a relative measure. This lack of clarity makes it more difficult for educators and administrators to understand and use the model. The state should provide more detail about how this measure will be used to make meaningful differentiation among schools.

**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?

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Missouri includes both academic achievement and growth in its accountability system, and gives them each significant weight. However, there are some concerns with the specific indicators chosen and whether the combination of the two measures will provide a sufficient incentive for schools to focus on helping students reach grade-level expectations.

Missouri's proposed system, in a thoughtful approach, heavily weights academic achievement and growth, with academic achievement counting no less than 40 percent in the summative score and growth making up no less than 30 percent of the summative score for elementary and middle schools.

Missouri will assess academic achievement through an index score called the Missouri Performance Index (MPI). The MPI assigns points ranging from 1 to 5 for performance at each of Missouri’s four levels of achievement. This index system provides an incentive for schools to focus on progress in student achievement at all levels and prevents high achievement from completely masking lower levels of performance, but, by assigning the greatest increase in points between the lowest level of achievement and the next, it misses an opportunity to create an extra incentive tied to moving students to proficiency. While Missouri’s plan to average data over three years will help to even out outlier years, there is a risk that schools in decline won’t be noticed because of prior years’ success.

The state relies on a value-added growth measure for elementary and middle schools. This complex statistical model measures how well students perform compared to predictions based on past performance among similar peers. While this model successfully assesses the extent to which gains in student performance track with a predicted trajectory, it does not measure how well students are progressing relative to proficiency. Since the predicted performance is calibrated against similar peers, it could set lower expectations for historically lower-performing students. The state deserves credit for providing technical documentation on the rigor of the model, which plainly explains its purposes and its limitations. There is concern that the failure to extend the measure of growth to high school implies that the state is not measuring the pursuit of college and career readiness through the entire educational experience.

It is not clear at all how these indicators will combine to create a ranking of schools to identify schools for support.

**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?



Missouri’s plan lacks strong protections for subgroups, uses a relatively high minimum subgroup size, and does not include subgroup performance in its summative accountability calculation.

Missouri will exclude subgroup data where group sizes are below 30 students, which seems high and likely to mask underperformance. To the state’s credit, the plan indicates that data will be pooled where group sizes are small, which should help mitigate the exclusion of small groups. However, Missouri includes no data to document the rationale for the choice or the degree to which student subgroups will be excluded from accountability based on these choices. The state does generally reference a stakeholder engagement process through which the group size decision was made, but provides no detail within the plan as to who was included in that process.

The state does not weight subgroup performance in the calculation of its summative accountability ratings. Instead, Missouri will rely on back-end checks, calculating separate accountability summative scores for each subgroup as if that subgroup were its own school to identify schools with low-performing subgroups.

The inclusion of former English learners for up to four years after they exit English learner services in the “English learner” subgroup is also concerning and might obscure the performance of current English learners. If the state is serious about the performance of these students, then separating former English learners from current English learners will help ensure that the data is accurate and meaningful, and that current English learners receive appropriate supports to be successful. The state could continue to measure the performance of former English learners separately for the purposes of transparency and program evaluation.

The state does not provide any detail as to how long it plans to include former English learner scores in this group and what impact that inclusion may have on the presence and performance of the English learner subgroup in schools and districts.

Missouri does deserve credit for a potentially strong plan to ensure student participation. It states that schools that assess less than 95 percent of all students or any subgroups automatically receive a zero for the academic achievement portion of the accountability rating, which sends a strong signal on the value of participation.

**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?



Missouri’s criteria for identifying schools for support reflects minimal compliance with federal law. The state will identify the bottom five percent of Title I schools based on a ranking of summative accountability scores and those that fail to graduate one-third or more of students for comprehensive support.

Additionally, schools with subgroups that meet criteria for comprehensive support on their own for two consecutive years will be identified for targeted support and improvement. Missouri does specify how many schools would be identified for comprehensive support, but it does not provide an estimate of how many schools would be identified based on low-performing subgroups.

The state does not provide information about whether or how it intends to differentiate schools outside of the comprehensive and targeted support process, for example, through a rating system beyond a binary accreditation status. A more differentiated system could provide stakeholders with meaningful information about overall school performance, particularly for schools that are on the borderline of identification. This information can help parents, public, and the state determine opportunities for school improvement and support.

**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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Missouri provides considerable detail about its system of supports for schools. This information demonstrates that the state envisions its accountability system as one that facilitates improvement, not just labeling and consequences. The state’s plan could be strengthened by including more firm, concrete consequences for schools that remain chronically underperforming.

Missouri’s plan describes a system of support for struggling schools that begins with a comprehensive needs assessment. A network of state support staff deployed regionally will support schools on the ground, conducting site visits, collaborating with school leaders in planning processes, and providing coaching and professional development. The system emphasizes six focus areas including school leadership, effective instruction, teacher and leader effectiveness, the utilization of data teams, culture and climate, and statewide professional development opportunities. Within each focus area, the plan describes activities and supports that will be provided. At several points, the plan references reliance on evidence-based strategies and indicates the availability of online resources and supports, including online delivery of professional development through a new system currently under development.

The plan is less clear on the distinction between the levels of state support available to comprehensive support versus targeted support schools. It indicates that staffing resources will limit the degree of support for targeted support schools, but does not delineate specifically what that means.

And though the process and supports available to both comprehensive and targeted support schools is wide-ranging and the state’s approach to support is systematic, the plan does not indicate any specific interventions or actions that may be taken for persistently low-performing schools beyond additional assessment to determine why interventions have not been successful. As a result, it’s not clear that low-performing schools couldn’t continue indefinitely in a cycle of identification and state support.

Further, while Missouri’s support system includes collaboration with stakeholders as one of its four principles for helping schools improve, the plan should indicate how efforts will be made to ensure collaboration is inclusive across stakeholder groups.

The state does not provide details on how it plans to use the 7 percent of federal funds intended for school improvement activities, including whether it will award those funds by formula or through a competitive process. Additionally, the state should indicate if and how it intends to provide direct student services using the optional 3 percent set-aside, which provides an additional opportunity for the state to align school improvement activities with its statewide goals.



**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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Missouri establishes that comprehensive support schools must meet the “original Improvement threshold” for at least two of the three most recent years. However, the plan does not clearly define “Improvement threshold.” Missouri could clarify this language, but the state should be commended for basing exit from support status on a performance benchmark, rather than simply improving its rank relative to other schools. However, basing exit on two out of three years, rather than two consecutive years, suggests that schools could improve initially and then backslide and still exit. Missouri could strengthen its exit criteria by clearly defining a high bar for sustained improvement.

In order to exit targeted support status, the subgroup of students for which the school was identified would need to surpass the annual goals of that specific subgroup for two out of the three years. While tying exit criteria to a performance benchmark aligned with the state’s long-term goals is a positive choice in theory, the relative weakness of the state’s long-term goals for student subgroups undermines the intent. As a result of insufficiently ambitious and uneven interim goals for individual student subgroups, this exit criterion appears weak.

**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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Missouri’s plan offers little evidence of how it would engage, going forward, in a continuous improvement process with ongoing engagement of key stakeholders, especially those from historically marginalized communities. The state should continue to use the processes and procedures it used in reaching out to stakeholders in drafting its plan for periodic consultations as well as look to build feedback loops into its existing support and intervention processes if they do not already exist. Given that the state’s assessment program is in transition, with additional tests coming online in future years, it would be appropriate to consider including the results from additional subjects down the line. Also, the state’s current list of indicators is minimal, and the state could examine models from other states where additional data is considered as part of the accountability structure.