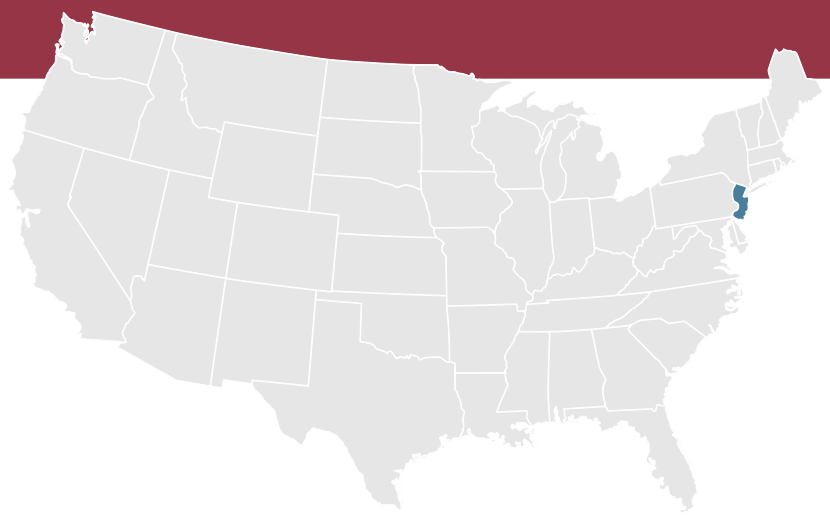# An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans

New Jersey

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.

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Overall Strengths and Weaknesses

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

New Jersey has developed a statistically sophisticated accountability system built on rigorous college- and career-ready standards. It has set goals at multiple performance levels, and it will be holding schools accountable for a short list of high-quality indicators, including strong emphases on student achievement and growth. One of the most promising components of New Jersey's plan is the weighting it puts on subgroups within the state accountability framework. By double-counting its student subgroups, New Jersey is attempting to ensure that schools prioritize the needs of all students.

New Jersey also deserves credit for creating a multitiered system of supports to assist identified schools and districts, and for supporting schools to increase student participation in advanced math coursework, especially students who traditionally do not have access. The state was thoughtful in using data to recognize this opportunity gap and developing a plan to address it.

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

New Jersey has done the hard work of creating strong college and career standards accompanied by long-term goals, but the state seems to undercut these objectives somewhat by hinging its accountability system entirely on percentile rankings rather than objective standards. New Jersey seems to be working to soften the impact of high expectations, and it missed an opportunity to embed its goals of college- and career-readiness into its high school rating system.

In addition, until there are data available, it's too early to say if New Jersey's proposed school-identification formula accomplishes its goals. While its sophistication may be a statistical virtue, it may present challenges to communicate to parents and educators and help them understand how their school performs and where it falls in the state's ranking system. The state's overarching emphasis on a school's relative place compared with other schools may be effective at identifying the lowest-performing schools, but not necessarily as a means of driving improvements in academic achievement, particularly for low-performing schools that deserve clear expectations of what they need to do to exit improvement status.

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?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | ✓ 4 | 5 |

New Jersey has a vision of every child graduating college- and career-ready, and it aims for 80 percent of its students to be proficient in reading and math by the year 2030. To set this goal, it reviewed current assessment data with stakeholders and looked at achievement trends in recent years. The state gives a rationale for choosing 2030 as the end target—it isn't just an arbitrary year, but rather the year students entering kindergarten in 2017-18 will graduate from high school.

The state has articulated the same end goals for all students and, to reach those, will be asking for more progress for lower-performing groups. It has articulated annual benchmarks for each subgroup and will also apply the same methodology to individual schools. It is unclear, however, if these goals are equally ambitious and attainable for all groups. For example, there is a large gap between where students with disabilities currently are and the state's long-term goal for this group. There are other subgroups, however, that are already close to meeting the state's long-term goal. Given the long timeline between now and 2030, it is unclear what the state plans to do when groups reach their goal before then.

New Jersey deserves additional credit for looking at the full range of student performance. In addition to its proficiency goal, the state has set goals for the percentage of students performing at the "approaching" proficiency standard, as well as for students reaching an advanced (exceeding expectations) level.

It is not clear if the state's postsecondary institutions have agreed to the state's chosen cut scores as being an accurate measure of college readiness, but New Jersey's plan would be even stronger if the state aligned its indicators with its vision of college- and career-readiness for every student (e.g., including a measure such as postsecondary enrollment without the need for remediation).

New Jersey has set a graduation rate goal of 95 percent by 2030. Since the overall graduation rate is currently 90 percent, it seems realistic and feasible that New Jersey would meet its goal by 2030. However, it may not be ambitious, particularly for some groups that are already above it.

New Jersey's growth-to-target model for English-language learners appears to be attainable and realistic. The approach is informed by research and individualized by the student's starting level of proficiency but also sets an expectation for when a student should reach proficiency.

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

New Jersey's accountability system uses the New Jersey Student Learning Standards, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments, and Dynamic Learning Maps. While the PARCC assessment system has been researched to show that proficiency is correlated to college readiness, and it passed federal peer review in 2016, it's not clear if the state has researched how well its graduates perform at the postsecondary level relative to the PARCC cut scores. Since the state mentions that 70 percent of students entering community college require remediation, the state may consider studying the extent to which performance on PARCC at 10th grade is predictive of academic readiness for credit-bearing postsecondary courses.

New Jersey has also articulated a clear method for measuring English-language proficiency using the ACCESS assessment, a common model among the states.

New Jersey also mentions separate steps it has taken to ensure it does not exceed the 1 percent cap on participation in the alternate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

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

New Jersey articulated a simple list of indicators and clear explanations of how those indicators will be included in the state's system and why. Its system will include student achievement (English-language arts and math), student growth, high school graduation rates, English-language proficiency, and chronic absenteeism.

While this relatively simple list of indicators has its advantages, New Jersey may want to consider ways to broaden its focus beyond math and reading over time. For example, the state could consider including additional subject areas, such as science. The inclusion of chronic absenteeism includes all grades K-12, which is a way to capture students who may otherwise be forgotten about or ignored, but it may not do enough to change the trajectory of the large percentage of students in subgroups who have to make dramatic improvements in order to graduate college- and career-ready.

At the high school level, New Jersey proposes to equally weight four- and five-year graduation rates, but it could strengthen its plan, and link it closer to the state's long-term vision, by attaching greater weight to the four-year rate. Additionally, given that the state has a 70 percent remediation rate at its community colleges and a 32 percent

remediation rate at its public four-year colleges, it is notable that New Jersey did not take advantage of ESSA flexibility to include a college-and-career-readiness indicator for its high schools. The absence of this indicator does not align with the overall vision of ensuring that every child will graduate from high school ready for college and career. This vision could be better reflected in the accountability system to ensure that the state is working toward meeting its goal.

New Jersey indicates it has plans to collect additional stakeholder feedback to help inform its system moving forward. Those activities could be an opportunity to revise, update, or add indicators as needed.

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?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | ✓ 4 | 5 |

New Jersey's plan places a strong weight on student achievement and growth. It proposes to include a simple measure of student achievement (percent proficient) and a normative growth model. The state plans to give slightly more weight to academic growth (40-50 percent of a school's rating) than academic proficiency (30 percent) in the accountability system. The growth measure applies only to elementary and middle schools.

New Jersey's growth model, called the 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. New Jersey deserves credit for pairing this type of growth model with a clean measure of achievement, but placing such a strong weight on SGP scores could dilute the benefits of having strong state standards if they play a smaller part in school ratings.

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?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | ✓ 4 | 5 |

New Jersey has taken several steps to ensure all subgroups are receiving a high-quality education. It will incorporate student subgroup performance directly into its school rating system, and each subgroup with 20 students will be double-counted toward the school's overall rating. The state consulted stakeholders and its technical advisory committee before settling on the threshold of 20 students, and it included a detailed analysis of how many students in each subgroup would be captured under this decision.

In addition to including subgroups through its overall rankings, New Jersey will also identify schools for targeted support if they have any subgroup perform, on its own, as low as the bottom 5 percent of schools statewide, and it will also identify any "consistently underperforming" subgroup. The state has not yet finalized its methodology for this last calculation, though.

New Jersey's plan would be stronger if it included simulations to analyze the impact of its proposals and ensure that its intent is carried out in practice. Given the way New Jersey is proposing to average its subgroups together, it's possible that approach could adequately identify schools with low-performing subgroups, but it's also possible that top-ranked schools could still be contributing toward large achievement gaps.

New Jersey should be credited for weighting English-language proficiency as 20 percent of schools' ratings, which is significant. However, New Jersey is proposing to include former special education students in the students-with-disabilities subgroup for two years after they complete services. Since exiting students tend to have higher performance, the state should monitor its data to ensure it is not masking the performance of students who are still receiving services.

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?

1	2	✓ 3	4	5

New Jersey has a complex plan for how it will identify schools for improvement. For each indicator, the state will "standardize" the results, which will show how the school performed compared with all the other schools in the state, and which accounts for different indicators having different means and standard deviations of performance. It will calculate both overall and subgroup scores for each indicator, and then translate those into final school rankings. New Jersey presents a statistically sound explanation for how it plans to calculate school scores, and it also presents a mock-up of what an individual school's report card might look like. New Jersey also deserves credit for its inclusion of subgroups in its summative rating determinations.

However, New Jersey still has work to do to help parents and educators understand how all of the interim targets and measures translate into the summative score. For example, the charts used to explain the process and provide clarity may actually cause more confusion. The state is also proposing to use a 90 percent confidence interval, which seems unnecessary and adds unneeded complexity to an already complicated system.

Moreover, the entire system is focused on identifying the bottom performers in need of support. It ranks schools on a percentile scale rather than comparing them with an absolute standard. This could have implications for statewide buy-in and the extent to which all schools see the system as relevant to their work.

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?

| 1 | 2 | ✓ 3 | 4 | 5 |

New Jersey's plan for supporting schools includes some specific actions, but it's not always clear from its plan what will trigger those. Low-performing New Jersey schools will follow a systematic process of data-needs assessment, improvement-plan development based on that needs assessment, implementation of evidence-based practices, and evaluation of the plan's effectiveness. The state will issue tools and models for schools to focus their improvement efforts on evidence-based interventions, matched to the specific accountability indicators that resulted in the school's designation as a school in need of targeted or comprehensive improvement.

New Jersey places districts into three performance levels, each with different levels of support. Districts in the lowest two levels must draft improvement plans that address instruction, personnel, operations management, governance, and fiscal management. If the district has failed to improve after two years of reviews, the state commissioner has additional powers to take corrective action, including providing direct oversight over district budgets and staffing. The state commissioner also has the authority to demand more rigorous interventions for schools that fail to make progress over time. Those include more intense scrutiny over improvement plans and changes to curriculum, staff changes, or reallocation of budgets. But New Jersey does not articulate how exactly it will decide when to use its authority when schools or districts continue to languish.

Finally, the state has not explained how it plans to spend the 7 percent of its federal Title I money dedicated for school-improvement efforts, other than saying that funds will be distributed based on need and the quality of the school's plan. New Jersey does not articulate how it will make those decisions.

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?

| ✓ 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

New Jersey's exit criteria are essentially the reverse of its identification criteria. It's proposing to exit schools from improvement status whenever the school slightly improves its relative ranking, regardless of how much improvement the school actually made. Under this approach, a school could exit improvement status simply by other schools getting worse, and not the school itself improving, let alone demonstrating a sustained trajectory of improved performance.

The state could strengthen its plan, and provide better guidance to schools, by identifying specific exit criteria at the outset that would demonstrate true, sustained improvement. Additionally, New Jersey appears to have exit criteria for the schools it identifies for comprehensive support schools, and for subgroups that would, on their own, qualify for comprehensive support, but not for targeted support schools with consistently underperforming subgroups.

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?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | ✓ 4 | 5 |

New Jersey has laid out a set of systems and structures to gather input from stakeholders as the state implements its ESSA plan, including on things like use of funds, needs assessments, and data collection for new indicators. It plans to leverage its new school-performance reports that have district- and school-level data, and review district and school plan alignment in improving subgroup achievement and interventions. The state recently created the position of the chief intervention officer to improve cross-divisional efforts to better coordinate supports and interventions. The chief intervention officer's efforts will include monitoring the effectiveness of the state department's work at regular intervals in an effort to continuously improve its impact on schools and districts and to reduce any unnecessary or overly burdensome processes.