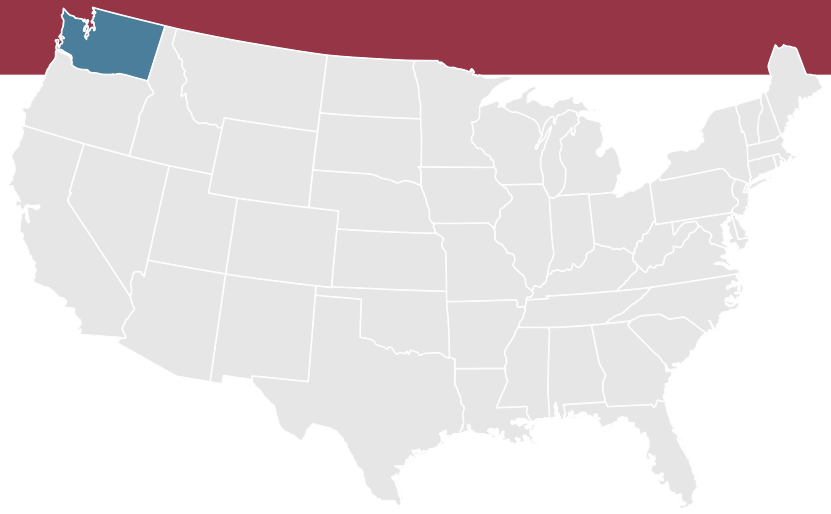


An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans



Washington

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?

Washington set forth ambitious goals and selected a largely straightforward set of high-quality indicators that should help broaden the definition of what constitutes a good school. Those measures include advanced placement completion and a 9th-grade on-track indicator that will encourage schools to pay attention to student success in a variety of ways in high school.

Washington’s multiple requirements for schools to demonstrate progress before exiting comprehensive or targeted support status is promising. The state’s pilot program that will require schools to establish a rigorous planning process should allow the state and districts to work more productively to improve student achievement.

Washington also deserves credit for including a number of elements that will support continuous improvement efforts, including audits of practices and a listening and learning tour to support the transition to the new accountability system.

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

Washington’s school identification system raises some concerns. For each indicator, it sorts schools into ten deciles of performance, and then creates a summative score based on a school’s total score on all indicators. While the decile system will originally sort schools into ten equally sized groups, the state says it will “freeze” those cut points and allow schools to raise their scores ratings over time based on future improvement. This approach could be productive if it sends adequate signals to schools about how they can demonstrate improvement, but it could also be challenging for parents and educators to understand and react to.

The state has a different problem with its growth model, which relies on relative rankings. This measure 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.

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?



Washington’s long-term academic goal is for at least 90 percent of all subgroups to achieve proficiency by the 2026-27 school year. Given the baseline data in 2016-17 provided by the state, this goal appears ambitious, but may not be achievable for some subgroups of students. Multiple subgroups’ current baseline proficiency is less than 40 percent and will require significant improvement over the next 10 years. Interim targets are set by subtracting today’s baseline from the 90 percent goal and dividing the difference by ten. This approach requires greater rates of progress for students who are further behind.

The state’s graduation goals are based only on the four-year cohort rate. As with proficiency, the state proposes that all subgroups have a 90 percent graduation rate by 2026-27.

The state’s goal for English language proficiency is a 1 percent growth in the rate of students who transition out of English learner status. The state expects English learner students to reach proficiency within six 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?



Washington’s academic standards are based on the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics. For its assessments, the state uses Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. The state also administers a Common Core-aligned alternative assessment to students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Washington can improve its plan by describing how it will meet the 1 percent participation cap for these assessments.

Washington defines languages other than English that are present to a significant degree as any student population that exceeds 1,000 students. Under these parameters, the state identified 12 languages. As a member of the Smarter Balanced assessment consortia, Washington’s mathematics assessment is translated fully into Spanish. The test also offers a glossary for 11 other languages. The state’s science test is offered in the top five languages in the state other than English. It is unclear what accommodations the state will provide on its English language arts assessment.

For its English language proficiency assessment, Washington will use ELPA21, a new English language proficiency assessment. This test is aligned with a common set of English language proficiency standards that correspond with the Common Core State Standards..

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?



Washington selected a variety of different indicators that are related to long-term student success. For elementary and middle schools, Washington will hold schools accountable for proficiency on state assessments in English language arts and mathematics, academic growth based on student growth percentiles (SGPs), English learner progress, and chronic absenteeism.

The chronic absenteeism measure evaluates student-level attendance. Each student who misses at least 10 percent of school days, including excused and unexcused absences, will be deemed chronically absent. The English language proficiency measure is based on the percentage of students who make adequate progress to transition out of the program within six years. Students' growth to proficiency is based on their entry performance level.

At the high school level, Washington will use a similar list but include the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate instead of student growth, and add in an on-track measure for 9th-graders and a measure of advanced course taking. The state primarily bases its graduation rate indicator on the four-year adjusted cohort rate. The plan also indicates Washington intends to adjust scores for schools with particularly large increases in extended graduation rates, but it's unclear exactly how it would do so.

The 9th-grade on-track indicator measures the percentage of first-time 9th-grade students who earned credit for all attempted courses. Research suggests this measure is linked to on-time graduation, but the state should monitor its data to protect against unintended consequence of student grade and school performance inflation. The advanced course taking (dual credit) indicator is based on the percentage of students who complete a dual credit course or program, such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or college courses, while still enrolled in high school.

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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Washington’s plan places a strong weight on student achievement and growth. It proposes to include a simple measure of student achievement based on the percentage of students who score proficient or above, and a normative growth model. The state plans to give significantly more weight to academic growth (50 percent of a school’s rating) compared with academic proficiency (20 percent each for ELA and math) in the accountability system for elementary and middle schools. There is some concern that the state places too much weight on growth in elementary and middle school grades, but the state is not planning to include a growth measure at the high school level.

Washington’s particular 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. Washington deserves credit for pairing this type of growth model with a measure of student proficiency, but placing such a strong weight on SGP scores could dilute the benefits of having strong state standards if they play such a smaller part in school ratings.

Washington’s use of SGPs could be further distorted by how it plans to translate a school’s SGP into an accountability rating. After using the normative SGP model, Washington plans to further sort the results into ten deciles. This strategy will result in a growth measure that is difficult to interpret and disassociated with the growth necessary to ensure students graduate ready for college and careers.

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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Washington will not incorporate subgroup performance into a school’s overall rating. Instead, the state will use subgroup performance to identify schools for targeted support. Washington says it will identify for targeted support any school with a subgroup performing, on its own, as low as the bottom 5 percent of schools statewide. However, it has not provided data on how many schools this rule might affect.

Washington has been thoughtful in its decision to set its minimum subgroup size at 20 students. Using three years of data will also help ensure that more students and schools are included in the accountability system.

Washington also deserves credit for embedding participation rate directly into how it calculates the academic achievement indicator. This is an effective way to make sure that schools pay attention to assessing all students. In addition, the state will prohibit any school that misses the 95 percent participation requirement from receiving a state or national award. A school that fails to meet the requirement for three consecutive years will have its accountability rating lowered by one point on the 10-point scale.

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?



To identify schools for improvement, Washington plans to rank all schools based on the total points earned through the summative grading system. In the first year, Washington will divide every indicator in the state’s system into deciles with equal numbers of schools. After that initial year, the state will “freeze” those point thresholds and allow schools to improve their ratings. There is some concern about whether this system will be fully understandable to parents and educators, and it will rely on a number of cut points for each indicator, but it will effectively identify low-performing schools in the initial year, and over time it will also give each school a target to shoot for on each indicator.

The state will use this point system to identify schools for comprehensive and targeted support. Based on the combined score across all indicators, Washington will identify the lowest-performing 5 percent of Title I schools. Additionally, the state will identify all high schools with a graduation rate below 67 percent. This identification will be based on three years of data and occur every three years.

Although it has not provided data estimating how many schools might be identified, Washington says it will use the performance threshold that corresponds with the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools to identify schools with consistently underperforming subgroups.

Washington is placing just 5 percent of a school’s overall rating on its English proficiency indicator, but the state should be commended for adding another category of identified schools: those with consistently low-performing English learners. This is a promising idea that other states may want consider as a way to provide targeted support tailored to English learners.

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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Washington proposes a system of supports that appears responsive to schools identified for comprehensive and targeted support. However, the plan relies on vague language and lacks specific details and timelines to determine whether these efforts will be sufficient to turn around low-performing schools. For instance, the state plans to require schools to use evidence-based practices from a “Menu of Best Practices,” but the plan does not make clear how it defines “best practices” or “evidence based.” That said, the plan includes a link to the most recent version of the menu.

The state department of education is responsible for supporting a needs assessment process, monitoring improvement plans, and offering technical assistance. If schools fail to make sufficient progress to exit identified status after three years, the state department of education will identify an external partner that will help the school develop a “more rigorous” needs assessment and develop a new improvement plan.

Additionally, the state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) will closely monitor the impact of the school improvement plans, and it says it will annually evaluate and adjust supports and interventions. If a school is not progressing, the OSPI may direct the use of resources and funds, and increase coaching and on-site monitoring.

One interesting aspect of the state’s plan is a pilot OSPI will run with eight districts to focus on the state’s, district’s, and school’s role in effectively identifying and applying interventions and supports in comprehensive and targeted support schools. This approach likely will help the state increase its effectiveness in supporting low-performing schools.

The state plans to distribute the 7 percent of its Title I funds set aside for school improvement activities through a formula. The state provides data on previous funding levels and a rough outline of how school funding will be determined, but the plan could be improved by providing additional information about how these funds will be distributed.

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.

Overall, however, the planned interventions appear to be fairly light—mainly planning and technical assistance—and the plan lacks concrete steps that schools must follow if they are identified for improvement and continue to struggle.

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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Washington’s exit criteria appear strong, but they lack some important details. To exit comprehensive support status, schools must demonstrate improvement on their overall accountability score, have at least one subgroup improve its overall score, not qualify for comprehensive support in the next round, and have a “strong plan” for school improvement. Targeted support schools face similar criteria, but for the subgroup that caused the school’s identification in the first place. Altogether these criteria appear to be strong, the state will need to clarify what constitutes sufficient improvement necessary for the overall score and subgroup achievement to qualify to exit identified status.

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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Washington plans to revisit its exit criteria for identified schools after the first round of identification is complete. The state plans a number of audits of practices, as well as a listening and learning tour to support the transition to the new accountability system and strengthen supports. The state also provides a description of other continuous improvement activities it will undertake.

These efforts may be productive, but it is difficult to know based on the plan what they actually entail, who will be reached, and how the state will use these activities to revise and improve its accountability system. To address this, Washington should develop a formal feedback loop for educators, school and district leaders, and stakeholders to provide feedback on how the plan is going and how it might be improved. Furthermore, the state should build on its past success in engaging with community and other stakeholders and develop a process to routinely work with a diverse set of stakeholders to improve its plan.