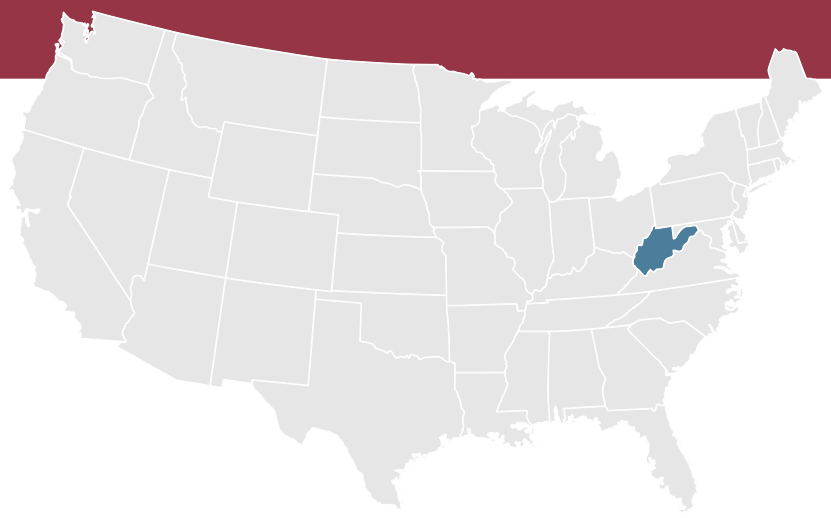# An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans

West Virginia

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.

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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?

West Virginia puts forth a clear vision with a relatively simple list of accountability indicators. Although there are some concerns with the plan's construction, the state includes a measure of student academic progress for elementary and middle schools that will monitor individual student growth annually.

To support schools, the state's idea of identifying similar schools to share practices to support turnaround efforts may be useful to teachers and leaders as well as community partnerships. West Virginia will build on its early warning system to include indicators of school quality in its accountability system. The teacher and principal academies for continued supports and professional learning targeted to student needs is an interesting approach that other states may want to consider. The state also appears to have taken stakeholder engagement seriously.

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

West Virginia's plan assesses school and student performance using a confusing point system that ignores subgroup underperformance and achievement gaps. The state also permits districts to choose their own assessments for use in the state's growth measure. This makes it difficult to ensure quality and comparability across schools. Furthermore, the state does not provide clear details or data about how it will treat the performance of subgroups.

West Virginia's section on supporting schools does not provide adequate details on the use of evidence-based interventions. Its exit criteria for low-performing schools are weak and lack consequences or actions, resulting in little more than what appears to be a slight tweak to the status quo for those students.

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 |

West Virginia articulated a vision to change the state's economic landscape by significantly increasing the percentage of graduating students who are well prepared for college and career. The vision is aligned with the state's assessments and goals. This is an admirable vision and much of the state's ESSA plan is designed to increase student achievement and readiness for life after high school.

West Virginia plans to award points based on student performance on state English language arts and mathematics assessments. Students earn 0.25 point for scoring below grade level, 0.5 point for reaching grade level but not proficiency, 1 point for proficiency at a college- and career-ready level, and 1.25 points for exceeding the college- and career-readiness level.

Using this points system, West Virginia's long-term academic goal is for all schools and all student subgroups to earn 80 percent of possible performance points by 2029-30. Under this system, it is theoretically possible for a school to improve its status rating in the accountability system without actually helping higher percentages of students reach college and career readiness. For example, is the school earning a score because most students are proficient and were awarded 1 point, or because there is a combination of students who are underperforming and students who are exceeding expectations? The state will need to monitor its data to ensure increasing percentages of students are reaching higher levels of performance, and that it clearly communicates student and school performance to parents and other stakeholders. West Virginia could also strengthen its plan by providing historical data to show whether its future goals are ambitious but attainable.

Despite the challenges with the points system, it is positive that West Virginia will use the Lexile and Quantile frameworks developed by MetaMetrics, Inc., which track student progress in literacy (Lexile) and mathematics (Quantile). The college- and career-ready threshold exceeds typical grade-level performance expectations. Aligning the state's academic assessments with these frameworks enables West Virginia to assess student progress toward graduating ready for college and careers. The state provides disaggregated goals by student subgroups, and expects faster progress for lower-performing groups.

West Virginia set its graduation-rate goal at 95 percent for all students and each subgroup of students by the 2029-30 school year. Although the plan includes some data about its past success in increasing graduation rates, it is unclear if the stated target rate is ambitious and achievable. Furthermore, it's unclear if the state's inclusion of a modified/alternate diploma in the four-year cohort graduation rate is consistent with the federal requirements.

The state uses the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA21) for English learners. At the time of submission, the state was waiting on an additional year of data to establish its goals and interim targets.

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 |

For mathematics and English language arts, the state uses the West Virginia College- and Career-Readiness Standards. West Virginia is planning to use four assessments: The West Virginia General Summative Assessment (WVGSA), the Dynamic Learning Maps for students with significant cognitive disabilities, the ELPA21 for ELL students, and the SAT as a college readiness assessment. According to the plan, the WVGSA has been psychometrically linked with the Lexile and Quantile frameworks. The 2017-18 school year will be the first year for the implementation of the WVGSA and the SAT as statewide assessments. However, it is unclear from the plan whether or not the state provides sufficient accommodations on those tests to English language learners and students with disabilities.

The links between the MetaMetrics measures and the state's performance standards could be strengthened with additional information about the new assessment and new standards.

Furthermore, within the accountability system, the state proposes to use district-administered benchmark assessments that may differ from district to district. The process for collecting this information is not yet developed and there is no clear process for establishing comparable rigor, alignment, or performance standards between these benchmarks because no data is currently available.

West Virginia defines a language other than English that is present to a significant extent as one that represents at least 50 percent of the English learner population. According to state data, 49 percent of its English learners speaks Spanish. The plan specifies that the state provides stacked Spanish translations of each test item for mathematics, but it's not clear what other accommodations it would offer English learners. Further, West Virginia failed to indicate any process for testing newly arrived English learners.

West Virginia could also strengthen its plan by also providing the steps it will take to ensure that it does not exceed the 1 percent cap on participation in the alternate assessments 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 |

West Virginia created an accountability system that rewards student performance across a range of indicators. Elementary and middle schools will be assessed based on performance in mathematics and English language arts, student growth in both subjects, English language proficiency, attendance, and out-of-school suspensions. All of these indicators apply to high schools, except for student growth, plus graduation rates, a measure of on-track to graduation, and postsecondary achievement. Although each indicator is weighted equally, West Virginia argues it is ultimately prioritizing academics since there are more academic performance indicators.

The state should be commended for including suspension and attendance rates in its accountability system. The indicator builds on West Virginia's past work tracking and monitoring the ABCs — attendance, behavior, and credits. It has an established and successful early warning system that has helped it raise graduation rates to an all-time high. It will continue to use these student success indicators as part of its new accountability model. That said, there are some issues with this indicator due to how the state awards points. The attendance measure calculates the percentage of students in all grades K-12 attending at least 90 percent of instructional days. This measure exempts absences due to out-of-school suspensions, which is a significant weakness in the indicator. The behavior measure is based on the percentage of a school's enrollment that received zero out-of-school suspensions. Although this is a good start, the measures could still have serious unintended consequences, such as pushing schools to use other exclusionary discipline practices instead of out-of-school suspensions.

At the high school level, the progress indicator measures the percentage of students who are on track to graduate and the percentage who have earned postsecondary credits. The on-track to graduate indicator is based on the percentage of students in 9th and 10th grade who earned at least 6 credits per year. It is also based on the percentage of 9th and 10th graders earning at least one credit in each of the four primary content areas: English, mathematics, science, and social studies. The postsecondary achievement measure is based on the percentage of students achieving college readiness on one or more Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs, the completion of a credit-bearing college course with at least a C average, or completing four of the required courses in a West Virginia State Approved Occupational Career Technical Education program of study. This is an effective approach to measuring student progress early in their high school careers to help keep themxs on track, as well as to assess both college and career readiness.

West Virginia includes both the four-year and the five-year adjusted cohort graduation rate. The plan would be strengthened, however, if it gave greater weight to the four-year rate than to the five-year rate. Currently they are weighted equally.

West Virginia completely removes academic achievement as a metric in a K-2 school accountability rating, and the state does not appear to address how it will calculate performance and hold accountable other unique grade configurations of 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?

| 1 | ✓ 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

West Virginia includes in its plan measures of academic achievement and growth. There are issues, however, with how the state plans to calculate and define those measures.

West Virginia's achievement measure is an index that gives students more credit for advancing to higher performance levels. However, it's not clear if the state's Lexile and Quantile measurement scales will be fully understood by parents and educators. And, as with any index like this, it will be important for West Virginia to monitor its data to ensure it does not allow the masking of underperforming students who fail to reach grade-level standards.

West Virginia's growth measure will assess student-level growth through assessments given at the beginning and end of the school year, but it's troubling that these assessments will be selected by each district. While this approach is designed to provide some information about student-level progress, and the state has provided some amount of guidance to its districts, it is unclear whether the information gleaned from this measure will be high quality and aligned with state-level assessments, standards, and goals. Furthermore, permitting each district to select its own benchmark assessment makes it difficult to compare the progress indicator across the state. This decentralized approach may not result in a statewide assessment protocol that allows for statewide comparisons.

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 |

West Virginia defines a consistently underperforming subgroup as one that earns an unsatisfactory rating for all indicators for three consecutive years. All schools with a subgroup that meets this criteria will be identified for targeted support. The plan would be strengthened if the state did not wait three years to identify schools with subgroups who chronically underperform, and if it would identify schools where subgroups are particularly low-performing on achievement, growth, and graduation rates. Furthermore, the state should be able to provide data about how many schools have subgroups that currently qualify for this designation.

West Virginia set its minimum subgroup size at 20 students, which is in line with many other states. However, there is a concern that the n-size is still too large given the number of small schools in the state. According to data included in the plan, if West Virginia lowered its subgroup size to 10 students, approximately 50 percent more schools would be accountable for black students, 100 percent more for English learners, 45 percent more for students with disabilities, and nearly 200 percent more for students of multiple races. Short of dropping the minimum to 10 students, West Virginia should consider other measures, such as using data from multiple years, to ensure that as many students count in the accountability system as possible.

Additionally, while the state will factor participation rate into its achievement and progress measures, the plan would be stronger if it included consequences for schools where participation rate fell below 95 percent, either for the school as a whole or for individual subgroups of students.

The state does not indicate how it will address recently arrived English learners, since it left these options blank in the template. On the plus side, the state proposes an innovative approach to ensure that the English proficiency indicator is included in as many schools as possible by incorporating its English language proficiency measure into its academic English language arts achievement indicator. Given the state's small and diffuse English learner population, this is an important proposal that other states facing a similar challenge should consider.

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 |

West Virginia will give each school a color-coded rating for each of the accountability indicators. According to its plan, the cutoffs between these ratings were determined from an examination of performance data across the state. However, little data or evidence was provided. This approach is troubling because it will create a lot of cut points determined on a relative scale, around which high-stakes decisions will be made. Furthermore, this model will likely be unclear about school performance above and below the cut points.

To identify schools for comprehensive support, West Virginia employs a tiered system that identifies schools in most dire need first, then continues to add schools to reach the 5 percent threshold with successively looser criteria. This starts in the 2018-19 school year. First, it will identify schools that score unsatisfactory on all of the indicators. If that does not identify at least 5 percent of schools, the state then loosens its criteria to capture schools with low achievement, growth, and English language proficiency that might not be as low-performing on the other school quality measures. If that still does not fill out the bottom 5 percent, the state will identify any schools with low achievement, growth, and English language proficiency. Given the complexity of this process, it seems likely that West Virginia has run estimates on the number of schools it would identify in each step, but it has not provided that data in its plans.

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 |

West Virginia outlines a clear and compelling plan to provide support and technical assistance to schools identified for improvement by its accountability system. The state will continue to provide technical assistance to schools aligned with its standards for high-quality schools, as well as a school improvement process based on the research of Project ASSIST with an adaptation to ensure the use of evidence-based interventions.

The state also plans to use its assessment of school performance to pair low-performing schools with high-performing ones with similar characteristics. In other words, the state is going to identify its high flyers and match them up with schools that need improvement. Additionally, for targeted support schools, the state will provide professional development opportunities for teachers and leaders, as well as a district administrator collaborative to work together and share successful practices.

West Virginia will allocate its 7 percent set-aside for school improvement activities through a formula beginning in the 2018-19 school year. However, the plan does not include sufficient information about how the state will determine how much money to allocate and to which schools.

Additionally, the state should indicate if and how it intends to provide direct student services using the optional 3 percent set-aside, which provides another opportunity for the state to align school improvement activities with its statewide goals.

The plan outlines specific interventions and timelines for identified schools. However, the interventions described appear somewhat generic and often lack sufficient detail to provide confidence that these schools will receive the support and resources necessary to turn around.

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 |

West Virginia will allow comprehensive support schools to exit identified status if they no longer fall within the rules for identification, if they show an unspecified level of improvement, and if they provide written assurances to the state that they will continue implementing their improvement activities. The state has similar exit criteria for targeted support schools, although those would be tailored to the particular subgroup for which the school was identified.

While these criteria could provide a solid foundation, it's not clear what level of improvement would be sufficient or if they would truly demonstrate sustained progress. West Virginia's plan would be stronger if it provided greater front-end transparency for schools about what performance they would need to demonstrate. For example, the state might tie exit criteria to goals set in a school's strategic plan based on the original diagnostics for inclusion in that status, or to absolute standards of student growth and performance.

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

West Virginia's plan describes with some detail how it will learn from its implementation efforts or modify its plan. Many of the state's technical assistance efforts lend themselves to sustained effort and to potentially change some of its implementation plans. The state will also use extensive surveys of parents, students, and staff of schools identified for comprehensive and targeted support.

One challenge with the plan as described, however, is that most if not all of the supports and technical assistance described appear to be directed exclusively at comprehensive and targeted support schools. It is unclear how the state will outline goals or expectations for continuous improvement in all other schools.

To strengthen its plan, the state could also put in place a formalized feedback process for schools and districts to identify barriers to implementation and improvement so that they can be addressed proactively.