

School Improvement Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Results of recent school improvement efforts have been, at best, mixed. Although individual schools and even some districts have made substantial gains, in too many places, student outcomes have barely budged at all. What's more, too often, decisions about what to do about low performance have been made behind closed doors, without engaging students, families, and community members.

The good news is that decades of improvement efforts have resulted in lots of evidence about what works — and what doesn't. What's more, ESSA requires state, district, and school leaders to engage families and community members in identifying the main challenges a school faces and developing solutions. This presents an unprecedented opportunity — and responsibility — for equity advocates to be actively involved in making informed decisions that improve outcomes for students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, and students with disabilities.

This set of documents is meant to help you do just that. It includes:

- This **overview**, which summarizes ESSA requirements for school improvement and identifies critical opportunities for advocates to engage.
- A guide to prompting state, district, and school leaders to use **evidence** to drive improvement.
- A guide to spurring education leaders to make the most of **ESSA's resource allocation review** requirements.
- Six topic-specific guides on **common challenges** schools face, including securing quality school leadership, ensuring quality teaching, and building a strong culture and climate.
- A document focused on actions states and districts may take if **improvement efforts don't work**.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ANY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INTERVENTION

- 1. It must start with data.** To maximize likelihood of success, the improvement process should always begin with probing the data to pinpoint school and district-based causes of underperformance so that leaders can identify appropriate improvement strategies.
- 2. There is not a single solution or quick fix.** Improving schools involves lots of people and lots of moving parts. Changing just one thing — e.g., buying a new curriculum — is unlikely to create lasting improvement.
- 3. Leadership is critical — and we need more strong leaders.** Virtually no schools have improved without talented leadership. But in recent years, states and districts have struggled to find principals who are prepared to lead improvement efforts. Building a strong leader pipeline is key to the success of future improvement efforts.
- 4. It takes time — but there should be measurable progress.** It may take years to see substantial improvement in achievement on state assessments or graduation rates. However, school and district leaders should be able to show gains on leading indicators (e.g., declines in chronic absenteeism, dropout rates, or suspension rates) within the first year.
- 5. It's not just about the bottom 5 percent.** While recent improvement efforts have focused primarily on these schools, most low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners actually attend the other 95 percent of schools — which often demonstrate poor results for these groups.

What does ESSA require?

Which schools need to take steps to improve? ESSA requires action in the following types of schools:

- **Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI):** Schools that are in the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools for all students, or have a graduation rate of 67 percent or lower.
- **Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI):** Schools that are “consistently underperforming” for any group of students, as defined by the state.
- **Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI):** Schools that are doing especially badly for any group of students (as badly as the bottom 5 percent of schools are for all students).

The law **requires** state, district, and school leaders to [engage various stakeholders](#) to develop and implement a plan for improving these schools. For additional information about what ESSA requires for each type of school, see Students Can’t Wait [School Improvement Process](#) factsheet.

TRENDS IN STATE ESSA PLANS

States have a lot of discretion in identifying TSI schools, and many states set the bar far too low by conflating ATSI with TSI schools.

Who is responsible for what under ESSA?

FOR COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT AND IMPROVEMENT SCHOOLS (CSI)

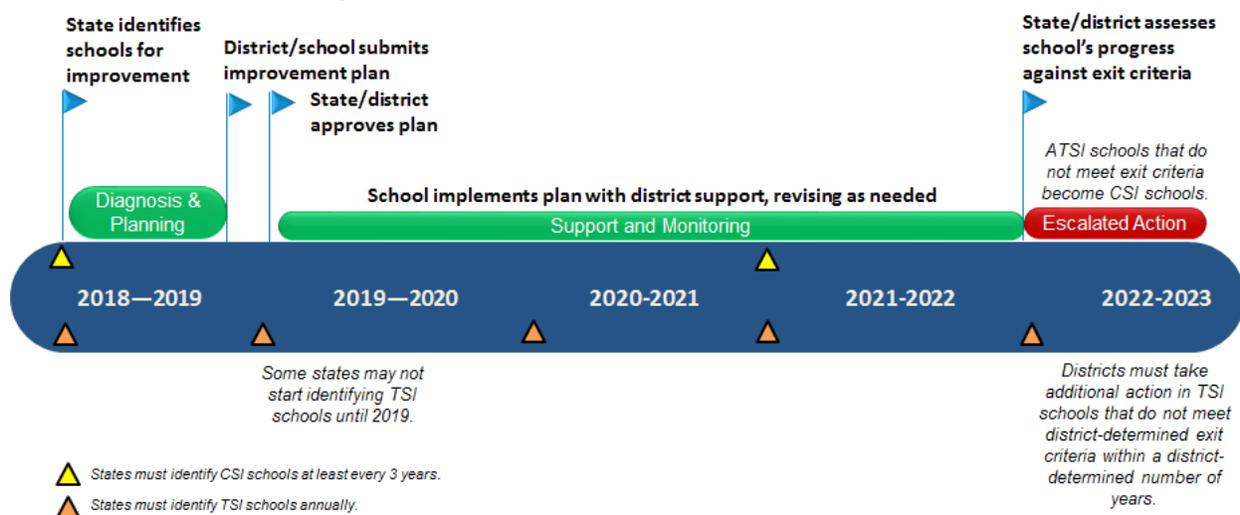
School Responsibilities	District Responsibilities	State Responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In collaboration with the district and community, develop an evidence-based school improvement plan • Implement the improvement plan with support from the district and community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocate local, state, and some federal funding to schools • Use data to uncover resource inequities between schools • In collaboration with schools and communities, develop and submit school improvement plans • Support schools in implementing improvement plans and monitoring progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify districts and schools for support & improvement • Allocate state and some federal funding • Use data to uncover resource inequities between districts • Approve improvement plans, provide clear benchmarks, and monitor progress • Provide resources and technical assistance to guide local leaders’ decision-making • Take escalated action if a district doesn’t meet the threshold for improvement (exit criteria)

FOR TARGETED (TSI) AND ADDITIONAL TARGETED SUPPORT AND IMPROVEMENT SCHOOLS (ATSI)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In collaboration with the community, develop and implement an evidence-based improvement plan, which should address resource inequities* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocate local, state, and some federal funding to schools • Approve improvement plans, provide clear benchmarks, and monitor progress • Take additional action if a school doesn’t meet the district-determined threshold for improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocate state & some federal funding • Provide resources and technical assistance to guide local leaders’ decision-making • May take action in districts with many TSI schools • Reclassify ATSI schools that don’t meet exit criteria as CSI schools
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*Resource allocation reviews are only required for ATSI schools, but advocates can prod state and district leaders to uncover and address resource inequities in all schools identified for improvement.

What is the timeline for improvement under ESSA?



Note: Some states have acted faster. In Louisiana, for example, the Department of Education approved some districts' plans for improving the lowest-performing schools in January 2018.

How can advocates engage in school improvement efforts under ESSA?

There are many opportunities under ESSA for advocates to engage in school improvement. Other guides in this series suggest specific questions to ask at the state, district, and school levels. Here are some examples of what advocates might consider doing:

At the state level, advocates can push for:

- **A strong, coherent school improvement process.** That includes setting reasonable timelines for planning and implementation, providing high-quality needs assessment and school improvement templates (and the data necessary to use them), and requiring ongoing family and community engagement.
- **Smart use of school improvement funding.** State leaders should provide guidance and assistance on how to leverage school improvement dollars, other federal funds, and state and local dollars to support improvement plans. They should also allocate at least some improvement funds competitively, based, in part, on whether the proposed interventions are supported by evidence.
- **Resources and technical assistance,** including sharing best practices across districts and schools and building district leaders' capacity to evaluate the evidence behind improvement strategies.
- **Strong resource allocation reviews** that honestly identify resource inequities between and within schools, and action on their findings.

At the district and school levels, advocates can:

- **Join school- or district-wide improvement committees and ask the questions that otherwise may not get asked—** such as those highlighted in the attached guides.
- **Call on districts to own their part in school improvement efforts,** such as recruiting and assigning strong leaders and teachers to the highest-need schools, providing ongoing training and support, and ensuring that district rules and procedures aren't impeding improvement.
- **Pay particular attention, and push for attention to Targeted Support and Improvement schools.** Schools that underserve some groups of students are often reluctant to confront disparities in opportunity and achievement in their buildings. Pressure from advocates to address inequitable access to strong teachers or disproportionate discipline is critical in these schools.

Finally, advocates must be ready to act when improvement efforts don't result in gains for students, and work with their district and state, as well as students, families, and communities to figure out what to do next.

▶ IMMEDIATE QUESTIONS TO ASK *your states and districts*

- When and how will schools learn that they've been identified for improvement? When and how will the public find out?
- When will improvement plans be due? By when will they be approved?
- Will state leaders provide needs assessment and school improvement planning templates? When will those be available for public input?
- How will district leaders engage stakeholders, as required under ESSA? In district-wide improvement committees? School-level committees? How can advocates get involved and ensure that committees are representative of all stakeholders?
- How and when in the improvement process will district and school leaders engage with family and community stakeholders beyond those on improvement committees?